

The Post-Modern Destiny of Islam

Religion is a phenomenon that has been part of the human experience from time immemorial. In the modern age, it has been taken as a given that this phenomenon has weathered the storms of time because of the immaturity and primitiveness of the pre-modern mind. The argument is that the continued evolution of science and technology would eventually reduce religion to the collective history of humanity, and that religion would eventually cease to be a part of human experience. Many loud and persistent voices even proposed (and continue to propose) that the demise of religion should be actively promoted because it was/is a major hurdle to the progress of society. The predictions from the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century regarding the demise of religion have proven to be only partially correct. Whereas religion has indeed receded from much of the public realm of modern society, a closer look at the private feelings and the popular culture in the most advanced technological societies shows that religious themes and religious ideas continue to appeal to all segments of society. A recent survey done in the United States showed that more than 42% of the scientists affirmed their belief in God and the percentage goes above 80% when the question of belief in God is put to average citizens.

Why have religious themes and ideas not lost their appeal even for the most educated elements in the most advanced societies? The answer is simple. The human being instinctively knows that the visible realm of reality is only a very small part of the ultimate reality; in other words, a human being instinctively knows that there is an unseen realm of reality that lies beyond the grasp of human senses and beyond the grasp of science and technology. Religion is an attempt to describe this unseen realm of reality. Furthermore, religious teachings contain the wisdom that defines the relationship between the visible realm of reality and the invisible realm of reality. Ludwig Wittgenstein has said that after one has heard all that science has to say, one is left with the feeling that the really important question regarding life have been left completely untouched. Questions regarding the true origin, the real purpose, and the ultimate destiny of the human being cannot be answered by science. Instead, it is the purview of religion to address these questions.

It is difficult to believe, even for the most well-informed and educated individual, that all the different languages in the world are the products of the evolution of a single, primordial, universal language. But the leading experts in linguistics have practically come to the conclusion that languages as different and distinct as Urdu, German, Chinese, Creole, Russian, etc. etc., are the different branches of the same tree that sprouted from a single pre-historic Ur-language. A similar conclusion forces itself upon a serious student of comparative religion. Some of the leading authorities in the field, Huston Smith being the most

prominent contemporary example, have noted that, in spite of the almost countless manifestations of the religious phenomenon, the fact of the matter is that all the religions of the world are the products of the evolution of a single, primordial, universal religion. All the religions in the world, in spite of their apparent differences, are unanimous on three fundamental points.

- The existence of One Supreme Lord to Whom the entire cosmos and everything in it is subservient;
- The periodic communication of this One Lord with selected human beings (known as prophets, sages, holy men etc.), chosen to deliver the Message of the One Lord to humanity at large;
- The inevitability of a life hereafter, to follow this-worldly life, in which a human being will be judged to see how closely he/she followed the teachings that were communicated to humanity by the chosen prophets, sages, messengers, etc., of the One Lord.

In short, the why of religion is: a) description of the unseen realm of reality and defining the relationship of the visible realm of reality to the invisible realm; b) providing the moral and ethical teachings that will establish a balanced and just society in this world; and c) providing the spiritual and transcendental teachings that will help the individual gain salvation in the Hereafter.

In relation to the why of religion, what is the current status of religion in modern society? Throughout human history, see that the masses have always taken religious teachings seriously. At the same time, however, a small minority of people have always held the view that there is no substance to the religious claim that the One Lord communicates to select individuals to reveal the Divine Will for the benefit of humanity. This elite has rejected the religious claims of life-after-death even more vehemently than its rejection of Prophethood. (In the sacred texts, there are many examples of people accepting the notion of the One Lord and chosen Prophets but categorically denying resurrection after death.) These individuals argued that it is only uneducated and backward people who believed in religion and religious teachings. For this tiny elite no modern, sophisticated, and intelligent individual could possibly believe in the teachings of religion. For them, religion was the product of pre-modern primitive societies/minds and therefore it was not worthy of any serious attention. Prophets such as Nuh, Saleh, Shu'aib, and Muhammad (Peace and Blessings be upon them) came to their respective people with the Divine Message. Those who rejected them claimed that the Prophets were propagating nothing but *Asateer Al-Awwaleen* — "stories of the ancient people." This tiny elite has always been very proud of its "intelligence" and its ability to "recognize" that all religion and religious teachings are really "myths of primitive people."

Up until the current century, this derogatory attitude towards religion had been limited to a tiny minority. But with the unfolding of the 20th century, this attitude has spread

among the masses at large, and this is a dramatic turn of events. Not very long ago religion was an important and integral part of society's culture, values, and ethos. But today, the modern society has almost totally severed its link with the religious ethos, considering it to be the useless baggage of a bygone era. Over a very short period of time, the attitude of entire societies towards religion has changed almost totally. The Protestant Reformation was a movement launched to rediscover "true" Christianity, but today the Protestant Europe has become the most secularized part of the globe. The United States was initially settled by individuals seeking religious freedom so that they could establish the New Jerusalem, but today San Francisco is known as *Sodom and Gomorrah by the Sea*. The trend to sever all links with religious beliefs and teachings seems to be almost universal in the emerging global village.

The articulation and spread of the derogative and cynically arrogant view of religion is due to external and internal factors within the religious phenomenon. The primary external factor is the scientific study of religion. The emergence of religious studies and the application of modern tools of analysis to religious texts and teachings revealed that many of the claims of religious authorities are either exaggerated or totally false. This scientific study of religion has proven, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that many of the texts, teachings, and institutions that religious authorities have claimed to be of Divine Origin are actually the products of human minds and human history. For example, literary and historicist analysis has shown that the Old Testament (the Torah) was composed by five different individuals (or group of individuals) over a period of centuries, and therefore the claim that it is the revealed word of God to Moses (AS) is incorrect. With such undermining of religious claims by the scientific study of religion, the prestige of religion among the masses obviously suffered an irreparable damage.

In addition to this external factor, there is an internal factor in the phenomenon of religion itself that has contributed to the decline of religion in modern society. Even though religion is of Divine origin, once it comes into the world and becomes a part of the human experience it becomes subject to the laws of nature and history that govern the visible cosmos. One of the most preeminent of these laws is the cycle of life that passes through the stages of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. There is nothing in this universe, including the universe that is exempt from this law, religion included. Consequently, history has seen the various religions emerge and pass through this cycle. The "death" stage of a great universal religion has been defined as the degeneration of a great universal religion that shaped the culture and civilization of a given society during its birth, growth, and maturity stage. During its decline and death stage, religion deteriorates into a mere folk tradition which is pushed to the fringes of society, thereby exercising no influence whatsoever on the culture and civilization of that society. According to Robert Ellwood, an expert in the history of religions, all the great universal religions have reached

the terminal folk tradition (i.e. death) stage in the closing decade of the 20th century, except one. The fact that all but one of the great universal religions have entered the folk tradition stage in their historical development is the internal factor that has led to the spread of the derogative view of religion among the masses, and, in effect, most religions have indeed become the "myths of ancient peoples."

Even though individuals in modern society have adopted this derogatory attitude towards religion, they still remain profoundly concerned with religious issues. The explosive and revolutionary advancement of science has not in any way increased its ability to answer those fundamental and profound questions that appear to be embedded in the psyche of each and every human being. Consequently, it is no surprise to find numerous New Age pseudo-religious cults emerging in advanced industrial societies that try to articulate plausible responses to these fundamental and profound questions outside the context of established traditional religions. The Heaven's Gate cult that was involved in the recent incident of mass suicide in California is one such example.

Where does Islam stand in relation to the why of religion and the modern predicament of religion in contemporary society? Strictly speaking, Islam is not a "religion" (a collection of ritual practices and dogmatic beliefs); rather it is a *Deen* (a complete way of life). Nonetheless, the *Deen* of Islam is built upon essentially religious propositions; consequently, much of what has been said about the contemporary condition of the religious phenomenon applies to Islam as well. As with other religions, Islam has also been becoming progressively marginalized in Muslim societies during the course of the 20th century. The attitude of the elite in Muslim societies towards Islam is hardly distinguishable from the attitude of Hindu, Christian, and Jewish elite towards their respective religions in their own societies. Similarly the attitude of the Muslim masses has progressively come to mimic that of the European Christian and Jewish masses. The most vociferous criticism of Islam was voiced by western orientalist circles in the beginning of the 20th century; today, a far more derisive and abusive criticism is being heaped upon Islam by the Muslims themselves. The scholars and proponents of Islam cannot even take proper stock of the vitriolic campaign against it, to say nothing about articulating an effective response. Consequently it is no surprise that, as with other religions in modern industrial countries, Islam is also appears to be dying a slow and seemingly certain death in the rapidly industrializing and modernizing Muslim world.

But there are a number of crucial differences between Islam and other religions that make it inevitable that Islam will not face the same fate as the other religious traditions in the coming century. Whereas other religions have entered their folk tradition stage, Prof. Ellwood notes that Islam is entering its reformation stage. This is the stage in which the religion attempts to brush off the dust of history, to recapture the pristine Prophetic vision, and to shape the contemporary reality in light of this re-discovered vision.

Islam is engaged in this exact struggle at this very point in its history. Each of the other great religions have already passed through this stage; the Christian Reformation of the 16th century and the Hindu renaissance during the Gupta dynasty are two such examples. Being the youngest of the historical religions, the reformation of Islam was bound to be later than the others. And it is very significant that the Islamic reformation, which started in the beginning of the 20th century according to Prof. Ellwood, is coinciding with the decline and disintegration of the modern-secular western paradigm. As a result, Islam is much better positioned to deal with the challenge of anti-religious secularism than were European Christianity and Judaism which were forced to confront this challenge during the modernity's vibrant youth.

But far more significant than this historical factor is the fact that Islam is far better equipped to brush off the dust of history and reclaim the Prophetic vision during its reformation period than any previous religious reformation. The reason for this is simple: the primary sources of Islam that will make this reclamation possible are still intact. The previous religious reformations failed because, by the time the religion reached this historical stage, the primary sources had been so corrupted that the reclamation of the Prophetic vision was impossible, in spite of the ardent wishes of the believers. But the primary sources of Islam, the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, are still intact, thus making the reclamation of the Prophetic vision possible. The orientalist circles in the beginning of the 20th century and certain Muslim elites today have done their very best to deconstruct these two primary sources. But any objective analysis of their criticism reveals that the criticism has no historical, logical, or sensible validity. In essence, the criticism is merely an expression of the critics' wishful thinking. Whereas the scientific study of other religious texts and sources has detected their historical manipulation and alteration by human beings, all genuinely scientific studies of the primary sources of Islam have only confirmed their authenticity. Besides the authenticity of these primary sources of Islam, there is a living tradition of Islamic scholarship that continues to exist even today. While it is no secret that many so-called Muslim "scholars" are nothing more than self-serving charlatans, it is also an undeniable fact that there are a handful of genuine scholars whose personal histories, intellectual endeavors, and continued sacrifices in this godless age are the most convincing testimony to the authenticity of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Indeed, such scholars are indispensable assets in the struggle to reclaim the Prophetic vision.

The great turmoil in the Muslim world is undoubtedly a sign of disintegration, of something dying, and at the same time those with knowledge also see that it is a sign of something new being born. That Islam which became far removed from the Prophetic vision because of historical circumstances is dying, and a new Islam faithful to the original Prophetic vision is being born. Islam claims to be the Final Message revealed to humanity, and history has shown that it is indeed the youngest of the historical universal religions. At the

same time, it also lays claim to being the primordial, Ur-religion, the *Deen Al-Fitrah*, of which all other religions are varying manifestations. As of now, history has not yet shown this claim to be true because the history of the past cannot validate this claim. It is only the history of the future that can possibly validate this claim. If and when the current reformation process in the Muslim world succeeds, only then will this claim be validated. That point will mark the culmination of the intellectual and spiritual journey of humanity which began when the primordial Ur-religion, the *Deen Al-Fitrah*, was shattered into sects by humanity's own bungling. The reclamation of this *Deen Al-Fitrah* through the unceasing struggle and sacrifice of noble human beings over the course of uncounted millennia will be the final proof against all those "intelligent," "modern," and "sophisticated" elite who have claimed and continue to claim that religion is nothing but "myths of primitive people."

Basit Bilal Koshul

A highly valuable paper by Dr. Justice (Retd.) Tanzilur Rahman — entitled "The Islamic Provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: What More is Required?" — is included in the present issue of "The Qur'anic Horizons." This article is especially relevant in view of the campaign launched by Tanzeem-e-Islami for bringing about certain amendments in the Pakistani Constitution. We believe that Pakistan can become a true Islamic State on a Constitutional level if the following demands are met:

- the whole Constitution should be subordinated to article 2A, i.e., the Objectives Resolution;
- following sentence should be added in the Constitution as article 2 B: No legislation can be done in Pakistan at any level, whether federal, provincial, or district, which is totally or partially repugnant to the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*;
- restrictions imposed through article 203B (c) on the Federal Shariat Court concerning the Constitution of Pakistan, Muslim Family Laws, and judicial laws should be revoked.
- the status of the judges of the Federal Shariat Court should be raised to that of the judges of Supreme Court and High Court, so as to enable them to fulfill their duties without having to face any pressures.

Another equally valuable and relevant article in the present issue is by Dr. Sayyid Tahir, entitled "Strategy for the Elimination of *Riba*." It may be noted here that, in addition to the proposed Constitutional amendments, the campaign by Tanzeem-e-Islami also includes the following demand:

- the government should withdraw its appeal in the Supreme Court's Shariat Appellate Bench against the Federal Shariat Court's judgement regarding *riba*, and it must cleanse Pakistan's economy from *riba* within a period of one year.

Due to the inclusion of these two papers, the current issue of "The Qur'anic Horizons" can be termed a special one, hence its unusual bulk. We hope that our patrons will read

these articles with the interest and attention they deserve, and will also bring them to the notice of their acquaintances, especially those interested in Constitutional law and economics.

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