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Revival and Reform in Islam

Fazlur Rahman (edited with an introduction by Ebrahim Moosa)
Oneworld Publications, Oxford 1999. pp. ix+226.

As is made clear in the editor's Note (pp. vi-vii), this book was transcribed from a recorded "manuscript" which was never in fact finished. The five chapters here presented nevertheless clearly form a substantial portion of whatever was envisaged by the author as the complete work.

After an Introduction by the editor, Chapter 1 concentrates on early political and/or theological developments within the Islamic world and, in particular, the rise of Ash'arism, obviously seen by the author as a deviation from what he understands as "the pure Islam of the Qur'an" (p. 23). Chapter 2 concentrates on the rise of Sufism, which in the author's eyes is a second major deviation to have afflicted Islam. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 concentrate on figures considered by the author to have been particularly concerned with reforming the status quo of their time and place, namely, al-Ghazali (Chapter 3), Ibn Taymiyya (Chapter 4), Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (Chapter 5), and Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (Chapter 5).

This short treatise, if one may call it that, is not without its merits, but it seems to the present reviewer to be characterised by serious over-simplifications and misunderstandings of what are perceived to be the main developments in Islamic thought over the centuries. Chapter 1, for instance, ends up being little better than an extended criticism of Ash'arism, which supposedly "denied that humanity had the power to act at all in the real sense of the word" (p. 67) and thus caused "severe damage to the human self-image as a repository of initiatives and originality and harmed the assumptions underlying law, which considered human beings as free and responsible agents" (p. 68). Rather, one would see Ash'arism as a conscious and necessary corrective to the one-sidedness of Mu'tazilism, which, in effectively denying Allah as total Creator, was unacceptably reducing the concept of Allah's power. Thus the Ash'ari position was in no way an extreme position which denied human responsibility, but rather a reassertion of the Qur'anic balance contained in, for instance, the verses:

It is nothing but a Reminder to all the worlds,
to whoever among you wants to go straight.
But you will not want unless Allah wants,
the Lord of all the Worlds. (Q.81:27-29)

Indeed, Fazlur Rahman himself acknowledges that neat, black-and-white solutions to this problem have never been achieved, since "this problem has defied an intellectual solution in the entire history of human thought" (p. 154). Rather, as suggested above, both ends of the spectrum, free will and predestination, are clearly indicated in the Qur'an (not to mention the hadith).

If Chapter 1 is anti-Ash'ari, Chapter 2 is effectively anti-Sufi, Sufism being blamed here for "teaching passivity" and bringing about a "vicious dualism between the 'inner life of the heart' and 'the actions of the limbs'" (p. 69). Again, although one does not deny that this happened in certain cases, it seems a travesty of genuine Sufism to describe it in this way. This is certainly not how the great shaykhs of Sufism, such as Shaykh al-Shadhili, who was active in the fight against the Christians during the Crusades, or Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio in the jihad against the British in Nigeria, or Shaykh Shamil in his jihad against the Russians in the Caucasus - to name but three examples - understood their Sufism.

The later chapters continue in the same vein. Fazlur Rahman's main concern is ostensibly to reinstate "the pure Islam of the Qur'an" and to question the nature of actual developments. That actual developments can be questioned is, of course, not in question, but one remembers the words of the second caliph, 'Umar, to the effect that "People will come to you and argue with you using the Qur'an. Argue back with them using the sunna, because the people of the sunna have more knowledge of the Qur'an." Rahman's view on the sunna is not explicitly stated in this book, but it is clear that he has considerable doubts about anything that is not Qur'anic and, in particular, about the authenticity of much of the hadith literature, whose origins are frequently assumed to lie in later fabrications (see, for instance, pp. 53, 72, 76 and 110). Indeed, we find him criticising Ibn Taymiyya for an "uncritical acceptance of hadith that distorts his concept of the Sunna and shackles him" (p. 163). But, even if we take sunna in the more organic, non-textual, sense of the normative practice of the Prophet espoused in particular by the early "fuqaha" of Madina and, to a lesser extent, Kufa, we find that Rahman does not have much trust in such authorities either: both Malik and Abu Yusuf, for instance, are effectively accused by him of circulating fabricated hadith, even if they themselves are not said to have been guilty of fabrication (p. 53). We note by contrast that Shah Wali Allah, who generally receives a favourable presentation by Rahman, is mentioned as preferring the "Muwatta" of Malik to the works of al-Bukhari and Muslim (p. 172), although Rahman does not mention that this was because of Shah Wali Allah's recognition of it as one of the most trustworthy sources for the early Islamic phenomenon.

All in all, one feels dissatisfied with this book, and not just because of its general content: in addition to the general misunderstandings outlined above, one finds numerous, albeit minor, errors of spelling and punctuation, as well as what are often quite serious errors of translation, all of which bely the claim on the cover that the book has been "meticulously edited". It will no doubt please those who are already interested in Rahman's work, but it is unlikely to be of much appeal to anyone else.

Yasin Dutton

Islam—A Short Introduction

Abdulkader Tayob

Oneworld Publications, Oxford 1999, pp. 224.

In his preface to the book, Tayob justifies the need for yet another introductory work on Islam by saying that in his experience 'students want access to the material and tangible aspects of the religion of Islam'. This he interprets as a desire to understand why Muslims do certain things such as wash before prayers, how they experience the Hajj pilgrimage etc. Tayob's task therefore in writing his introductory book is not so much an exploration of the historical context of Islam as an attempt to explain what is obviously visible within the lives of Muslims and the Islamic world.

Tayob achieves this with an interesting conceptual approach. He introduces the reader to the world of Islam as though he were leading him through a mosque. Thus, under the chapter titles such as the 'minaret,' 'minbar' 'the prayer niche,' the author discusses various areas of Islamic life, including purification rituals, gender issues, feminism, leadership, politics, aesthetics and music. The discussions are part scholarly debate and part descriptions of rites and experiences of the living Muslim community. Only the final chapter, 'Challenges and Opportunities in the Twenty-First Century,' is removed from this mosque concept. It is more a re-evaluation of Islam and the opportunities and challenges it faces in the next century, with the focus lying particularly on globalisation in the world and how Muslim communities are responding to this phenomenon.

Though the chapters focus on some aspect of the mosque's architecture, they quickly draw the reader into the various themes of Islamic life and thought as well as short but pertinent accounts of Islamic history. For example, Chapter Two which is titled 'Ablution' begins by the Qur'anic verse exhorting believers to perform the wudu' as well as a Maliki tradition on the virtues of performing the ablution. The writer uses the notion of physical purity as a religious axiom to explain why water facilities are generally found in mosques. He then goes on to explore the legal dimensions of the purity laws, their ritual function as well as the symbolic notion of purity in Islam. In the analysis, Tayob looks at the major anthropological approach to the subject, namely the work of Mary Douglas and the recent arguments against her thesis