

Rejina Kabir

Sarojini Naidu College for Women

Book Review

Islam the Straight Path: Islam Interpreted by Muslims, Mohammad Abd Allah Draz, et al, edited by Kenneth W. Morgan, MotilalBanarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1987, ISBN: 81-208-0403-1, pp. Xii+453, Price: Rs.495/-.

The book under review is an anthology, a collection of eleven articles written by different authors. It is a concise presentation of the history and spread of Islam along with the beliefs, obligations, laws, ideas, culture in various countries and the Islamic philosophy as interpreted by some outstanding Muslim scholars. Every chapter of the book under review is a contribution of different author to portray different aspects of Islam in the light of their own understanding. So it is difficult to evaluate this book in a unified manner. But no doubt it can be claimed that this book surely can satisfy the primary queries regarding the historical and cultural background of the spread of Islam as well as fundamental concepts of Islam of an inquisitive enquirer. It is noteworthy that the eleven chapters of this book were written in seven different languages. The English translations of the articles were rechecked by the respective authors and extensively edited to make sure that the book can be appreciated as a unified whole to the Western readers.

The first chapter of this book *The Origin of Islam* is authored by Mohammad Abd Allah Draz. The whole chapter gives an account of the core of Islam. According to him Islam is external as well as internal peace, peace with God and peace with all creatures, peace which comes through submission to God. The Qur'an and the *Sunnah*¹ are the guidelines to follow the straight path of Islam. 'There is no God but Allah', 'Muhammad is his servant and

apostle' and 'All men are brothers' are the three elements of Muslim creed as they are stated three successive *Surahs*² of the Qur'an. Such is the straight path of Islam.

Ideas and Movements in Islamic History is the second chapter of this book authored by ShafikGhorbal. This chapter deals with an elaborate analysis of the developmental stages of Islam. The sections are oriented in timeline spanning from the awakening of Islam to Islam of the present day. A statistical report combining the different countries of the globe provides a clear vision about the Muslims' population rate. Findings of figures indicate that the Muslim population of the world may be conservatively estimated at around 400,000,000. Approximately half of the Muslims of the world live in eastern Asia, from China and Indonesia to Pakistan. The largest Muslim country is Indonesia.

The third chapter, *Islamic Beliefs and Code of Laws*, is authored by Mahmud Shaltout. The basic principle of Islam as a religion is both belief and legislation which organises all the relationships of man. As per the Qur'an the result of belief is faith, and the result of the code of law is good behaviour. Here six fundamental beliefs of Islam are recognised and analysed. They are: (i) Belief in *Allah*, (ii) Belief in Muhammad as the *Allah's* Prophet, (iii) Belief in Angels, *Jinn*³ and the Soul, (iv) Belief in the Apostles, (v) Belief in the Scriptures and finally (vi) Belief in the Last Day.

In the part of Islamic Code the author has justifiably discussed in details Worship of *Allah*, made up of prayers, fasting, payment of religious tax and pilgrimage. It should be noted that the payment of religious tax and pilgrimage is not compulsory for all Muslims but for those who have the means to accomplish them. Regarding the dealings with non Muslims we found that Islam does not hold any enmity or hatred towards non-Muslims. Peaceful coexistence and cooperation in daily life with all the sects of humanity is being appreciated.

The Rational and Mystical Interpretations of Islam authored by A.E.Affifi is the fourth chapter of the book, which deals with a keen discussion of the interpretations gleaned from the writings of the old school of Muslims – mystics and rationalists, including both the theologian and the philosophers. The early rationalists of Islam were known as *Mu'tazilites*,⁴ and the mystics as *Sufis*. In the discussion under the subsection the Philosophical Attitude we are being acquainted with some outstanding Muslim Philosophers viz., Ibn Sina, al-Farabi and Ibn-Rusd. In the last part of this chapter the *Sufi*'s conception of God is discussed in short. In this chapter the author has introduced some *Sufi* saints and has given a special emphasis on the women saint of Basara, viz., Rabi'a. This chapter throws some light on the interpretation of Muslim theologians, philosophers and mystics and their contribution to the vitality of Islam throughout its long history.

The fifth chapter of the book under review is *Shi'a* authored by Mahmood Shehabi. The word *Shi'a* literally means 'followers'; the followers of Ali, looking upon him as the true successor of Muhammad. The first part of this chapter is dedicated to provide a historical background and internal political conflict within Islam concerning the post of Caliph after the death of Muhammad. The rise of *Shi'a* is also being discussed in details. The major points of disagreement among the *Sunni*⁵ and *Shi'a* school is noted carefully.

Successive five chapters of the book under review can be unified on the basis of the similarity in the subject matter of their discussions. The sixth chapter is entitled as *Islamic Culture in Arab and African Countries* authored by Ishak M. Husaini. Seventh chapter is *Islamic Culture in Turkish Areas* authored by Hasan Basri Cantay. The following chapter of the book is entitled as *Muslim Culture in Pakistan and India* is contributed by Mazheruddin Siddiqi. The next two successive chapters, *Islamic Culture in China* and *Islam in Indonesia*, are authored by Dawood C. M. Ting and P. A. Hoesein Djajadiningrat respectively. The prime

focus of these chapters is to portray the Islamic Culture in various parts of the globe. The concern of these chapters is not to discuss Islamic culture in its entirety but to discuss specifically the religious culture which originates mainly due to various interpretations of the two major sources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet of Islam. The contention of these chapters is to show that the diversities found in Islam are not for the variation in geographic environments or for different civilization but for the recognition of varied sectarian interpretations of the sources of Islam.

The last chapter is entitled as *Unity and Diversity in Islam* authored by Mohammad Rasjidi. The core of this chapter may be summarised in the way that, Islam as a religion is followed by more than five hundred million Muslims in different parts of the world and belong to various socio economic, and cultural backgrounds. Among these diversities all the Muslims of the world are unified in the acceptance of six articles of belief which are the fundamental principles of Islam discussed in details several times in various chapters of the book under review. It is very clear that the worship obligations, or requirements of Islam are known as the Pillars of Islam and are actually the guidelines to deal our responsibilities in our society which are covered by Islamic law. At present there are four major tendencies in the Islamic world namely – orthodoxy, reform, *Sufism* and *Shi'a*. Increase in education and communication is helping the followers of each of the sects to a better understanding of their own as well as others perspectives.

The book under review is no doubt a great attempt to cover all the aspects of Islamic history, beliefs and obligations along with its divergent cultural flavours. The book under review may be recognised as a historical and descriptive account of the straight path of Islam though critical reflections and assessment are not altogether absent. But it is to be mentioned that each chapter of the book under review bears the substantiality which can hardly be

covered adequately in a book. For that reason we get only a few glimpses of the profound light hidden beneath. But it enhances the inquisitiveness of the reader which would nudge the discerning reader to be more inquisitive and hunt for further literature surveys.

The several authors of the book have discussed about the spread and development of Islam in various countries of the globe but no one other than, Mazheruddin Siddiqi, and Hasan Basri Cantay, authors of the chapters entitled *Muslim Culture in Pakistan and India* and *Islamic Culture in Turkish Area*, have tried to find out the root cause of significant decline of Islam and point out the causes of the backwardness of Muslim culture today. The book would have been of greater value if there was some analysis regarding the present day impact of fundamental principles of Islam in other countries as well.

The most noteworthy point that comes out of the book under review is that Islam as a religion ceased to attract educated worshippers as active participants. The prayers and addresses conducted in Arabic in a particular form can no longer provide inspiration to a generation who does not have the knowledge about the language and the traditional sciences. Equality, peace and justice are the fundamental principles of Islam which should be reflected in every sphere of human life as has been revealed in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. However, such fundamental principles are often interpreted wrongly misleading the present generation. Presently, Islam has become a highly individualistic religion though its strength and vitality springs from its social and institutional ideals. There lies a responsibility of the learned people to interpret the fundamental principles of Islam properly for the common man. In this book the authors of several chapters have tried to do that in a very lucid manner, which demands appreciation.

The fourth chapter of this book entitled *The Rational and Mystical Interpretations of Islam*, bears a special significance to me. The discussion about the philosophers in this

chapter of the book is hardly sufficient. The author maintains a typical silence regarding two philosophers mentioned by him, viz., al-Farabi and Ibn-Rusd, and barely we get an idea about the philosophic thoughts of Ibn Sina. For this reason the chapter provides an incomplete picture of the philosophical development in Islam. But in spite of that, I would especially like to appreciate the author of the article for his lucid presentation of the philosophic thoughts in Islam and also for his unique approach in establishing a relation between the religion, philosophy and mysticism. He has also discussed in detail how the very notion of Supreme Being is interpreted from different aspects of religion, philosophy and mysticism. The notion of Supreme Being as discussed in Islamic philosophy from the metaphysical point of view may be open as an area of research for the enthusiastic readers. The most positive appeal of this chapter is that it raises many fundamental questions rather than merely providing information and thus provide for the readers to develop their own thinking at their own pace.

Notes:

¹Sunnah-The prophetic teachings of Muhammad given either by word or example or by tacit approval the prophetic teaching outside the Qur'an.

²Surahs -A chapter in the Qur'an.

³Jinn- A kind of supernatural creature in Islam. Concerning the substance of the Jinn, the Qur'an states several times that He (Allah) created them from fire.

⁴Mu'tazilite – the school of rational theologians in Islam.

⁵ Sunni- A follower of the Sunnah; by usage it has come to refer to the orthodox position in Islam, those Muslims who are not *Shi'as*.

References:

Afnan, S. *Avicenna His Life and Works*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958. Ali, A.,

The Spirit of Islam, London: Christophers Ltd., 1949.

Ali, A. *The Spirit of Islam*, London: Christophers Ltd., 1949.

Fakhry, M. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, Second Ed, London: Longman, New York:

Columbia University Press, 1983.

Leaman, O. *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy*, London & New York: Routledge, Taylor &

Francis Group, 1999.