

sterility in our social life naturally so, for, in its original constitution, Islamic society was based on nothing but religious thought. As long as that thought was alive, the programme of Islam was a practical proposition; but when religious thought became the preserve of “specialized scholars” the practicability of the Shariah became an illusion. Instead of being a Way of Life, the knowledge of the Law became a merely academic affair – a mountainous collection of ideas about Islam, so thickly overlaid with the dust of decadent conventions that **the Prophet (p) himself, were he alive, would find it difficult to recognize his own teachings.**

The erstwhile simplicity and reasonableness of the Shariah has been buried in a forest of subjective deductions propounded by several generations of scholars nearly a thousand years ago. Thus, many of our so-called “Islamic” notions are in reality nothing but a heritage of the Neo-Platonic philosophizing so fashionable in the Middle Ages. Many of these notions are downright faulty because they were based on a faulty, or inadequate, understanding both of the world around us and of the original teachings of Islam. This holds true, in particular, with regard to innumerable opinions on social and moral matters. Nevertheless, such faulty notions have ever since been upheld by “accredited” leaders of religion, and have thus become endowed with the **halo of religious sanctity.**

The popular mind has grown accustomed to identify, uncritically, those worn-out processes of thought with Islam itself – a custom fraught with tragic consequences. As these “thoughts” are examined critically they begin to reveal the inadequacy of so many of those outdated opinions, then the popular mind begins to question the validity of Islam as such. This, however deplorable, is only natural. The average Muslim, never having been taught to think, is extremely gullible. Just as easily as they can be misled by pseudo-religious superstitions and slogans, they are prone to fall into the opposite extreme and to question the principle of Islam as soon as any of their habitual, personal “convictions” have been shaken.

Abu Hanifah said: “If you find in my words anything that conflict with the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace), throw my words to the wall and keep to the Sunnah.” This shows that he was perfectly aware of the *relativity* inherent in all human reasoning. It was but his successors who quickly overlooked this element of relativity and formed a “school” of rigid imitation; and the same happened to several other scholars of that

period – with the result that the “early righteous generations” were gradually, and undoubtedly against their will, removed from the sphere of **creative criticism**, and blind reliance on their authority was made a “postulate of Islam.” Muslims became accustomed to see infallibility where no infallibility had been claimed. To continue in the same error would be to jeopardize Islam as a religion and a culture-producing factor.

We must approach the Quran and Sunnah with fresh and unprejudiced minds – just as if the Quran had been revealed in our days and the voice of the Prophet (p) still audible in our midst. We must guard against a static perseverance in forms of thought which have nothing to recommend them except old age. We must guard against the idea that five or six centuries ago Islam was better understood than it could be understood today. **Most emphatically it was not.**

The Shariah of Islam has been utterly mishandled and corrupted not only today, not only yesterday, but for nearly a millennium: since the time, that is, when it was cut off from the direct understanding of the average person and became, unwarrantably, a preserve of “specialized” scholars. The true Shariah is hidden in a maze of scholastic views and deductions – a superstructure of accumulated subjective opinions now clothed in the garb of “**fictitious authority.**” The social discipline envisaged by the true Shariah is **not** synonymous with rigidity but is, on the contrary, calculated to foster all the truly creative powers of which the human, spiritually and socially is capable. It is concise, clear-cut and uncomplicated and whom God has granted sound reason should understand.

A literalist reading of the Qur’an is so damaging to its overall message of existential responsibility, personal growth, and social well-being. The fact that it was revealed to the Prophet during 23 years of his prophethood reflects its dynamics and development. Moreover, the non-logical order of its verses in the Book also reflects that it is neither a pure analytical text that caters only for categorical minds nor is it a text that contradicts the apparent contradictions in nature and changing humankind. By some chance, the Qur’an’s compilation reflects the changing human nature and its non-systematic order; it seeks order, the way humans seek order through some apparently contradicting laws and priorities. It is a Generous Book, that is how it is commonly known: al-Qur’an al-Karim. Its generosity stems from this flexibility and dynamics. A literalist reading kills such a generosity and flexibility.

When will Muslims enter the brave new world of Islam?

Whose is the Fault?

Answer: The schools of rigid imitation

The Muslims came to believe that all the **subjective conclusions** of the early scholars were valid in an absolute sense & for all times to come. From the Islamic point of view, nothing could have been more disastrous than this belief. It led to a **standstill of religious thought**, and thus to **the decay of the civilization that had been built on that thought**. It is no use to deny that a good deal of the Islamic scheme has been brought into a **false perspective through our assuming that the views of the “early generations” of Muslim scholars were in every respect identical with the view of God Himself**. We must have the courage & the humility to admit that all knowledge gained by means of **subjective reasoning is time-bound and, therefore, relative**. For centuries we have neglected the Prophet’s (p) saying that “knowledge is like the sea” – inexhaustible & always open to new adventures of the spirit. Islam only teaches peace & co-existence & understanding of each other. **It stands supreme among all religions for its comprehensiveness & rationality**. **Why then does the Muslim world suffer from individual disarray, interstate divisions aggravated by sectarian & political expediencies?** One may ask, quite legitimately, how has this state come about in the Muslim world & where lies the solution?

Instead of being given a true, simple & therefore easily understandable picture of Islam, the Muslims are constantly being presented with a monstrous, many-sided edifice of scholastic interpretations, a second-hand Islam, as it were, which was fixed & solidified into its present complexity nearly a thousand years ago.

Every ordinary, intelligent Muslim has heard a lot and is hearing every day about how “simple” Islam is. Whenever one takes the trouble to look into the matter, they find that a thousand years of theology (kalam) and canonical jurisprudence (fiqh) have made that simplicity entirely illusory. They see many sects and schools of thought, often bitterly opposed to one another, and each of them claiming to be the only legitimate exponent of Islam. The ordinary, intelligent Muslim, not being a professional “scholar” himself, is naturally baffled by all that intricacy of accumulated scholarship and by the resultant diversity of religious conceptions prevailing among the professional fuqaha.

Very soon it becomes obvious that the views as to what Islam aims at, what a Muslim is and how they should behave are not quite the same with, say, a Sunni alim belonging to the Hanafi school, a fundamentalist Wahhabi, a “Twelver” Shii, or a Sufi not to mention many lesser schools of thought. In the inability to master the complex theological and legal systems underlying all these “schools,” the ordinary, intelligent Muslim very often despairs of ever being able to decide as to what is “Islamic” and what “un-Islamic.” On the other hand, if they are of really mature intelligence, they refuse to be guided by mere assertions, and contradictory assertions, at that, of the “professional ulama” who claim to be “in the know” quite apart from the fact that they are often repelled by their mediocrity and their bland ignorance of the world around them.

What they want, & what they believe themselves entitled to, is a direct, personal insight into the programme of Islam. As they are unable to obtain it, they cease, for all practical purposes, to regard the Law of Islam as a guidance in the business of living. Sometimes

they entirely turn away from Islam and become what is termed “Agnostic.” If they are of a conservative bent of mind, they stick to some of the conventional forms of Islam without, however, allowing them to influence the practical course of their lives.

Instead of being given a true, simple & therefore easily understandable picture of Islam, the Muslims are constantly being presented with a monstrous, many-sided edifice of scholastic interpretations, a second-hand Islam, as it were, which was fixed and solidified into its present complexity nearly a thousand years ago. These interpretations fall roughly into two headings: fiqh, which is the technical name for Muslim jurisprudence, which the fuqaha themselves not infrequently confuse with Shariah; and kalam, which is a particular brand of Muslim theology conceived in Aristotelian & Neo-Platonic terms. Between them, these two disciplines have produced not one but many systems mostly conflicting with one another of what is popularly, & quite incorrectly, termed “Islamic Law.”

But these systems are not only many in number: each of them is, in addition, subdivided into a multitude of “schools” in accordance with the complicated, hair-splitting reasoning adopted by its representatives. If you look into any compendium of fiqh for instance, the very readable Bidayat al-Mujtahid by Ibn Rushd (in which he impartially quotes the views of the various legal schools without giving his personal preference), you will find that there is practically not a single problem of law, great or small, on which the various schools & systems fully agree. As regards kalam, the divergences are still more pronounced and, as a rule, much more violently expressed than in fiqh. In this way, the principles & the application of the Shariah which, as we know, touches upon every aspect of human existence & is the life-breadth of Islam have been made wholly inaccessible to the understanding of anybody but a highly specialized “scholar,” & to him only as an academic proposition & not as an actual path of life. There was a time when Islam really was a simple affair, a scheme on which every Muslim could consciously cooperate; but that time is long since gone.

With a very few glorious exceptions, the ulama of the past centuries persuaded themselves that nobody could understand Islam unless they **implicitly accepted** all that the early generations of Muslim scholars had already written about it. In consequence, the ulama did and still do

their best to impress upon the common people that it is their moral duty to be a human parrot. That the Law of Islam (or whatever now goes by that name) must be obeyed, but not necessarily understood. That an approach to its principles can be achieved only after a long, specialized study. In other words, that the Shariah, though it touches upon everybody’s life, is nonetheless not everybody’s business.

Once upon a time (this much is admitted), the Quran & the Prophet (p) did address themselves to everybody but owing to some mysterious decree (**not** to be found in the Quran or Sunnah), this principle seems to have undergone a change, & the knowledge of the Shariah, which once had been a living presence in the daily thoughts & doings of every adult Muslim, came to be reserved to a special, specialized, class of “scholars.”

Whether they intended it or not, the highly complicated reasoning which Muslim fuqaha have adopted in their various expositions of the Law has cut off the latter from the people’s living thought. The common people are now expected to take the decisions of the fuqaha at their face value & no arguments, please! The result could not be other than it is: namely, an estrangement of the common people, however intelligent, from the true spirit of the teaching which they profess to follow.

It is evident that, besides enunciating certain positive directives as to our behaviour & action, the Shariah has also a most important psychological function to fulfill: it is meant to inculcate in us something which is best described as a “moral habit” that is, our instinctive ability to decide at every stage of our life whether an impulse (desires & inclinations, likes & dislikes) is or is not in agreement with the general moral scheme envisaged by Islam. Parallel with it, the instinctive urge to follow the right impulses & to subdue the wrong ones. But since the historical evolution of fiqh/kalam has resulted in an estrangement of the Law from the average Muslim’s consciousness, the conceptions as to what is & what is not Islamic have been divorced from any “moral habit” in the true sense of the word, & have been transformed into purely **mechanical habits**.

This rigidity of religious thought, or rather, the enforced **absence of thought**, has made for complete

THESE ARE VERSES OF THE BOOK

THAT MAKES THINGS

CLEAR

THE QURAN: 26:2

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