



An Islamic Reading Mosaic: A Review Essay

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Islam is in crisis, that is for sure. But it is in a reforming—not disintegrating—crisis. Whether it be the 1.5 million emigree Muslims in West Germany or the Asian Muslims of Malaysia there are definite stirrings. The question arises whether there might be some suggested reading that will help us place these developments in perspective.

The mosaic of books here mentioned should be helpful in an introductory way and provide an access to our understanding of the Muslim mind and our relation to it.

Islam today, not unlike in the past, strives to give an Islamic shape (i.e., a shape that conforms to divine willing) to history and society. The value of W. C. Smith's *Islam in Modern History* (a standard study, if not yet a classic) is that it enables us to see Islam in this striving. It is a pity that the book has not been revised—that is, brought up to date, for it was published in 1957 and only reprinted since. Therefore the reader won't find much about oil, Iran, or Afghanistan. But don't let that be a worry. Much of these matters can be picked up in news magazines. And this is, moreover, no ordinary history but rather an extended meditation upon history; and in this meditation one will discover soon enough the power of the Muslim ideal, the diverse understandings of it, and the ambiguities of situation that help shape this diversity. Having read Smith, today's events will no longer cause surprise, and the reader will be made increasingly sensitive to the interplay between the self-confidence now engendered by oil and the continued uncertainty arising from troubled circumstance.

The theme of the book might be this sentence: "Islam is a religion whose major this-worldly expression is its self-implementation in a social order" (211), or otherwise put, "the basic Islamic question is what form Islamic history shall take" (29). The book is a meditation upon this theme.

In later books Smith will try to set aside the term religion; fortunately he still finds it useful here. Every religion (as a form piety takes) "designates some element in this world as mediating the other world" (25). Religion (as piety itself) is the specific perception of this mediating element (18). If for the Greek that link was rationality, and for the Christian the person of Christ, for the Muslim it is the

divine righteousness embodied in the Koranic imperative. For the Muslim the Word of God strives through the community of Islam to become incorporate in history. If for the Muslim history is not final, it is nevertheless decisive. What Islam is essentially (submission to divine righteousness), it must become actually (a society organized by such submission). The burden of Islam today is, therefore, not as much theoretical as practical—as submission to God it is to be

embodied in social form, and it ought to be successful.

Smith describes the varied struggle for embodiment in the Arab, Turkish, Pakistani, and Indian worlds. Yes, he writes two decades ago, but the present is a continuation of a struggle earlier begun. These four are selected on purpose, for they show four very different ways the striving goes on. The Muslim world is far from homogeneous, and while it may be one in appeal to the Koran as final revelation, it more often exists at odds as to how that appeal is to be lived. The reasons for this are many: reasons of ethnic identity, historical past, economic or cultural niche, political setting, language spoken.

For the Arab Muslim the failure of Islam in today's history strikes with greatest force. Islam began with them, and blossomed in now past glories. Those glories were as it should be, for God, in whose hands is destiny, was with them. But in recent times, Arab dignity has been sorely assaulted by Western colonialism—Israel being the unwelcome remnant of that!—and Muslim efficaciousness undermined by Western secularism—for it separates out the religious, which it at best compartmentalizes and at worst eradicates. This double blow does not lead to a speculative wonderment about the truth of Islam (for who would question that), but rather to practical wonderment as to whether the power of Islam might have gone. Responses to this attack range from the conservative sense of failure within the Arab Muslim soul itself, and with that a renewed appeal to the efficacy of the Muslim ideal, to an aggressive apologetic which sees Islam as victim only and in triumphal fashion calls for the single-minded strengthening of Muslim institutions, including the state. Now oil gives this troubled mind new fuel for success.

Turkey is different. Non-Arab, but Muslim, modern Turkey chose a secular answer to the quest for a proper Islamic form in today's history. The young Turks abolished the caliphate in 1924, dissolved mystical brotherhoods in 1925, substituted Western legal codes for the Muslim *sharia* in 1926, deleted the clause from the constitution calling Islam the religion of the state in 1928, substituted Turkish for Arabic as the religious language in 1933. A contradiction in terms? Not so for Smith and some of his sources. It is rather in the eyes of the perpetrators being truly Muslim in a modern and enlightened way. Islam is not clericalism; it is a lay religion. It is not the interpreters of Islam (the *ulema*) who make Islam, but only the Koran. This is reform, and there has been not a little appeal to Luther! The outcome of this Turkish modernist solution is not yet known, but the country today, since Smith's writing, has fallen upon hard economic (100 percent inflation) and political times, and the cleric-dominated religion of the masses seems in resurgence.

Pakistan chose the form of a definite Muslim state. The perspective of Smith is what makes the details interesting. We may deride Pakistan as a poor exemplar—what about public flogging or the pathetic war with Bangladesh—but, to

put it in Smith's words, "The failure of an Islamic state would be easier than its success, but no less important." Moreover, the last word is not yet in, and in any case it is not the achievement that makes a state Islamic, but its aim at becoming Islamic—and the process of becoming continues.

The Muslim community in India exists in deliberate counterpoint to that of Pakistan, for denied entry into that state in 1947 they remain a participating minority within a non-Muslim secular state—a minority, but participating! And just this is what Smith finds unique about the

Muslim quest for historical form as it takes shape in India. “What gives them a radically unique posture among the major sections of contemporary Islam,...is the fact that they share citizenship in the new republic with an immense number of other people. They constitute the only sizable body of Muslims in the world of whom this is, or ever has been true.” One might wish to modify the assertion—what about Tanzania, for example—but the point is not the less important for that—a major Muslim minority participating constructively within the framework of a non-Muslim, secular state. There is Muslim theological basis for this mode of existence, for Muhammad early on established a civil contract with the Jews in Medina, though it was later in practice abrogated.

The book concludes with an extremely brief survey of other major Muslim regions—southeast Asia (the nation with the single largest Muslim population is here, Indonesia), central Asia (Soviet Union and China, each with forty million or more), southeastern Europe, sub-Sahara Africa—and, of course, Iran, and a final summary chapter.

Smith feels unqualified to speak of Iran. Perhaps he should still have tried, for Iran’s current, as well as historic, prominence surely warrants it. To gain a preliminary insight into the Iranian Shi’ite passion for a Muslim solution, one could not do much better than read George Braswell’s little gem, *To Ride a Magic Carpet*.

Braswell’s small book is not a history—one can get the basic outlines of the Iranian story from encyclopedia and yearbook, or from one of any number of semi-journalistic paperback histories now appearing on the market. The incomparable value of Braswell’s book—autobiographical in form and written just prior to the present crisis so it does not pander to the interests of hostage watchers—is that its content is shaped by an astute and sensitive Christian missionary. Here one will hear mullahs speak their mind; one will see Muslims deep in worship; one will be impressed by the modernizing efforts of the shah; one will see an economic, intellectual and religious dislocation taking place—the stuff that leads to revolution, which indeed soon took place. Surely having read this book one will share in the pain of the Shi’ite Muslim, if not in the solution that both ravel and unravels on our nightly TV screen.

We have, then, with these two readings become sensitive to the Muslim striving for meaning in today’s world. But Islam is a religion. It owns two reference points—world and God. Thus, it simultaneously seeks for its meaning in transcendence. The claim of Muslim and Christian cannot but contend.

We Believe in One God, jointly edited by Annemarie Schimmel and Abdoldjavad Falaturi, brings this matter before us. It does so not forcefully or aggressively, but in an exploratory fashion. Jesus is differently seen. What are contem-

porary images? Revelation is differently believed. How is this so? Time and history are differently experienced. What are the consequences? God is differently known. Can this really be?

The center piece literally—it comes in the middle of the book—and thematically (the book is subtitled “the experience of God in Christianity and Islam”) is Falaturi’s essay on “How can a Muslim Experience God, Given Islam’s Radical Monotheism?” Christians wonder how Muslims can experience God without Jesus; Muslims wonder why Jesus should be so necessary. This chapter gives a Muslim insight.

Falaturi first of all agrees that experiencing God has been a problem for Muslim thought—but this is largely due to the tendency towards the “abstract monotheism” of traditional Muslim philosophy and theology. It is much better, he argues, to examine the Koranic material itself where we find instead a “radical monotheism.”

He demonstrates the actuality of God in Koranic perspective. This is an actuality in which God, who is one and unique, nevertheless relates to a world as his creation. As creator he transcends, even as he inheres in it, in the sense that everything originates in his action—the ubiquity of divine agency. The proper human response is that of praise, which contains within it a certain experience of God.

Second, he grounds the experience of God in free will—human agency. Distinct from other creatures, man (and woman) as living and active is endowed with the power to fulfill the purpose of creation, service (*ibada*) to God, so as to actualize it in uprightness. We might observe that here he reverses Luther’s argument on bondage of the will. If the human will is bound, it is bound in matters that relate to things that are beneath which God determines, but when it comes to things that are above—service to God—the human creature is uniquely endowed with free will to unfold that which was imparted in creation. The freely-willed surrender (*islam*) to God is the supreme human dignity and a further valid experience of God.

Finally, the experience of failure, for not all succeed always, itself leads to a further experience of God. As one seeks genuine servanthood (*abd*), innumerable obstacles are encountered. In struggle, failure, forgiveness, renewed struggle, one engages in “a living practical dialogue between man and God.” This too is a real experience of God.

All of this is quite convincingly stated. Of course, one might ask if he really gets away from mediation between God and man as he asserts, especially in light of the centrality of the Koran in all his discussion; or one wonders if it is helpful to affirm a virtual determinism in all non-spiritual matters and what that does for an understanding of creation; and one wonders also whether evil can be so lightly passed over as simply external obstacle. Nonetheless, it sets forth important terms for continuing Christian-Muslim dialogue. Islam does claim an experience of God; if real, does this make Jesus optional?

Islam strains to find its meaning in history, and in reference to transcendence. The Christian likewise strains in these two directions. What further might we read that will give us a basic introduction to Islam and help clarify a Christian manner of response? To take the latter query first and move towards the former—the pain of dialogue is particularly evident in the October 1976 issue of the *Interna-*

tional Review of Mission, individual issues obtainable from the WCC. No one will go off rejoicing after struggling through that verbal exchange. Crusades and colonialism are still much too close to the surface of Muslim emotion and thought to make us feel at ease. Our response must be one of persisting endurance in mutual conversation. The volume edited by Donald McCurry, *The Gospel and Islam*, covers a vast range of topics. Admittedly it is dominated by an evangelical urgency to see conversion to Christ—hardly an evil hope I would think—and individual essays show differing degrees of insight, some of even deep insight. None will find the essay on Islam in the West boring, or the discussion of contextualization irrelevant, or the always sensitive writing of Cragg—in this case on basic divergences between Muslim and

Christian—without significance. If we are discomfited by the fact that the Muslim respect for Jesus is not reciprocated by a Christian respect for Muhammad (and I hope we are), then a look at Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Koran*, and Montgomery Watt, *Prophet and Statesman*, might not be amiss. And if it is true that the Koran as the Word-made-words has a significance in Islam not unlike to that of Jesus Christ as the Word-made-flesh in Christian faith, then an acquaintance with the Koran itself might be to advantage. Indeed, Lutherans would only be fulfilling the hope of Luther who in 1542 argued against censorship and urged forward the publication of a Latin translation of the Koran. Every church library ought to possess a copy and Christians ought to read it. The edition perhaps to be most recommended is that of A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*. If, finally, one wishes an introduction to Islam, Kenneth Cragg's *The House of Islam* is perhaps best for the general reader. It is short, manageable, and has useful guide questions and short bibliographies.

So much for the mosaic. These readings may yield a design. Mosaic means “belonging to the muses.” Perhaps you too will be inspired.

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