

Book Reviews

Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought Shaykh Taha Jabir Al-Alwani

Dr. Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, former President of International Institute of Islamic Thought, U. S. A., is an eminent Islamic scholar, jurist and specialist in Usul. He is also founder-member of the Council of the Muslim World League, a member of the International Fiqh Academy, and the president of the Fiqh Council of North America. Born in Iraq in 1935, Dr. Al-Alwani studied in Al Azhar University and obtained doctorate in Usul al Fiqh in 1973. He served as a Professor of Usul al Fiqh at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh.

A prolific writer, Dr. Al-Alwani has to his credit a good number of publications. His literary work includes the editing of *Al Mahsul fi 'Ilm Usul al Fiqh* (The Sum and Substance in the Science of Usul al Fiqh) by Imam Fakhr al Din al Razi (six volumes). He is also well known for his scholarship in Islamic jurisprudence. His published works include the important titles - *Al Ijtihad wa al Taqlid fi al Islam* (Ijtihad and the Unquestioning Adoption of Tradition in Islam), *Adab al Ikhtilaf fi al Islam* (Ethics of Disagreement in Islam) and *Islah al Fikr al Islami* (The Reform of Islamic Intellectual Discourse).

Dr. Al-Alwani is widely acclaimed in the West for his discourse on the 'Fiqh of Minorities'. He is the pioneer of our time explaining afresh the importance of 'Time and Space Factor' in understanding Maqasid Shariah or the objective of Divine Law.

The book under review [*Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought*], published by International Institute of Islamic Thought, London, U. K., ISBN 1-56564-414-X, pages 301 + V, paperback - price 15 British Pound] is a composition of articles of the author earlier published in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences that throw insight on the contemporary ills of the Muslim society, calls upon the Muslims scholars and intellectuals to realize the depth and dimension of the crisis and come forward for restructuring the society by refreshing the pristine teachings of Divine Guidance and work earnestly for renewal and revival of Islam and the Muslim society. This book discusses a variety of subjects in eighteen different headings that have been arranged in four broad chapters.

Chapter-one - 'Islamic Thought'- comprises of five articles. The first article - 'Some Remarks on the Islamic and the Secular Paradigms of Knowledge', the second article - 'Towards an Islamic Alternative in Thought and Knowledge', the third article - 'The Reconstruction of the Muslim Mind: The Islamization of Knowledge', the fourth article - 'The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today' and the fifth article - 'The Islamization of the Methodology of the Behavioral Sciences'.

In the first article – ‘Some Remarks on the Islamic and the Secular Paradigms of Knowledge’ the author underscored the need to develop an Islamic paradigm of knowledge that will serve as an alternative to the secular positive paradigm, an alternative that combines Islamic and universalistic perspectives; addresses the intellectual and conceptual problems of all humanity, not just Muslims; and includes a tawhid-based reconstruction of the concepts of life, humanity, and the universe [pp 4-5]. Dr. Al-Alwani underlined that the entire edifice of the Islamic paradigm of knowledge must stand on the foundation of tawhid, augment its sources with several principles and fundaments that are essential to its comprehensive and compassing nature [pp 5-6].

In the second article – ‘Towards an Islamic Alternative in Thought and Knowledge’ the author rightly identified that the current approach of replicating the traditional thought did not prevent the decline of the Ummah. Likewise Western thought has failed to protect the Ummah from its inherent, adverse, harmful and disastrous effect. The author is also very critical of the ‘elective or selective approach’ for the proponents of this approach have not presented or come out with any working formula as how to blend traditional and modern thought [p 10]. Dr. Al-Alwani analyzed the crippling effects of the blind imitation of previous scholars and stressed the need to free the Muslim mind from the negative effects and shackles of imitation on the psychology, education, and way of life [p 14]. The teaching methods and curricula of the educational institutions are largely responsible for Westernization and alienation of the students from Islam [p 15] for the Muslim world’s current system of education has failed to instill any belief, sound vision, standards, or motives [p 17]. Dr. Al-Alwani emphasized that the only way to come out of this mess is to instill a strong Muslim belief and an Islamic vision in the hearts and minds of the Muslim youths in order to achieve a sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah. This, the author said, could be achieved by integrating existing systems and creating a single educational system based on the teachings of Islam, its spirit and vision. The new education system, its syllabi and methods, should all be infused with the principles and goals of Islam. It should generate a sense of mission, whereby professional achievements and material success may be regarded as bonus, not as the purpose and objective of education [pp 17-18]. The author rightly emphasized that while developing the alternative in thought and knowledge special attention must be given to the study of Islamic civilization which is the most important means of creating and crystallizing the individual’s feeling of belonging to the Ummah. Dr. Al-Alwani stressed that the new Muslim educational strategy must include a course of study that explains the bases, values, sources, and goals of Islam as a source of thought, culture, and civilization. This course should be of four years and be studied regardless of specialization, the author opined [pp 18-19]. The author underlined the need for classifying all available materials of the Islamic legacy according to modern social requirements and also prepare textbook that reflect the Islamic vision of contemporary reality and needs.

In the third article - 'The Reconstruction of the Muslim Mind: The Islamization of Knowledge' the author emphasized the importance of restructuring the Muslim mind so that it can once again engage in *ijtihad* [p 21] and becomes the bearer of guidance and light to the humanity [p 23] by providing the Muslims with the intellectual underpinnings for a complete civilizational transformation [p 23] and thereby reform thought removing traditional and historical obstacles that hobble the Muslim mind [p 23]. Dr. Al-Alwani put emphasis on conducting research by Muslim scholars that has immediate relevance for the Ummah [p 25]. In the absence of integrated and methodologically sound textbooks, the challenges before the contemporary Muslim scholars are enormous that needs to be addressed intelligently and with precision.

In the fourth article - 'The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today' the author emphasized that those who want to pursue this noble work of Islamization must acquire vast knowledge of the Quran and a firm grounding in the social sciences and humanities [p 35] so that scholars may not lose equilibrium while engaging in independent and creative thought [p 32]. Dr. Al-Alwani underlined the need to construct a systematic methodology for dealing with the text of the Quran and the Sunnah for such a methodology could consider the particulars of those texts from a comprehensive methodological perspective and in the light of higher aims and purposes of Islam that will liberate research from the confines of *taqlid* for old solutions in new guises are still old solutions and will never provoke the needed reform or save the higher purposes of the universal message of Islam [p 41]. Indeed constructing such a methodology should be considered a major priority and an essential precondition for Islamization of Knowledge for outright rejection or wholesale acceptance of the contributions of the past, as also cosmetic grafting of elements without reference to a systematic methodology will not benefit the Muslims [pp 41-42]. No doubt separating knowledge and values was a serious mistake. The Islamization of Knowledge undertaking seek to make this issue one of the universal concern by laying out its philosophical and strategic frameworks, providing the means necessary to achieve it, and establishing the guidelines required to connect scholars with truth rather than speculation [p 46].

In the fifth article - 'The Islamization of the Methodology of the Behavioral Sciences' the author argued that the crisis of Ummah is essentially an intellectual crisis [p 49] which is the outcome of deviating from objective thinking [p 50]. Dr. Al-Alwani stressed that the Ummah now needs to make a great educational and intellectual effort to rid itself of the debilitating and paralyzing effects [p 52]. The author thinks that split in the educational system, which is a legacy of colonization, is a major reason for the backwardness of the Ummah [p 56]. The Ummah must abolish this dual system of education in order to rid the Muslim mind of the dichotomy knowledge, produce a united education system and a methodological syllabus capable of providing the Ummah with Muslim specialists in every practical area as well as in the social science and humanities [p 56]. Dr. Al-Alwani emphasized that the Ummah must establish academic institutions for research and study [p 57]. The author hoped that Islamization of behavioral sciences, which is the basis of all social

sciences, would enable the teachers to structure and develop their knowledge and reintroduce these sciences to their students from an Islamic angle by giving examples and evidence and adopting from the Quran and the Sunnah [p 58].

Chapter-two – ‘Issues in Islamic Jurisprudence’ - deals exclusively with Ijtihad and Taqlid, in all six articles. In fact both Ijtihad and Taqlid have been widely discussed, total 96 pages. The author emphasized that we must shun imitating rulings of the scholars of the past ignoring contemporary realities and must make renewed and vigorous intellectual exercises to solve modern day problems.

Chapter-three deals with ‘Human Rights’ focusing on the right of the accused and a full length article on ‘The Testimony of Women in Islamic Law’ (pp161-186). Here the author has raised a very pertinent and timely issue in view of great misunderstanding in the West about women’s subordinate position in Islam as compared to men. The author while explaining the verse 2: 282 of the Quran has taken a broader look into the social milieu. The reason for halving women testimony is lack of their involvement in financial transaction and not their subordinate position in Islam and their inferior status as human souls. The author has established by giving examples that the witness of man and woman is equal in areas other than financial transactions. ‘There is no basis ... for claiming one is somehow less than the other. Such a view only manifests its holder’s ignorance’ [p 171]. The author here has successfully come out from the cultural prejudice of the earlier jurists that many a times colored their rulings and discussions on women. Going deep into the discussion on the testimony of women the author emphasized that ‘we must develop [new] methodologies based on the Quranic paradigms, and strive to develop our methodologies for critiquing Hadiths, rather than leave our intellectual legacy to the depredations of others’ [pp 182-183]. He reminded that Sunnah is there to clarify the Quran, not to contradict or reject its basic principles [p 171].

Chapter-four deals with the important issue of ‘Political Thought’. In the first article of this chapter – ‘Political Science in the Legacy of Classical Islamic Literature’ - the author discussed significant challenges the Muslim scholars of Political Science confront in understanding and formulating proper perspective of Islamic political discourse and emphasized the importance of mobilizing all available resources to pursue the introduction of a revolution of thought in the Ummah and establish sound academic foundations for an Islamic science of Shariah-based principles and conduct of government [p 231]. Dr. Al-Alwani stressed the need to link political discourses and practices with Shariah obligations and overall Divine Guidance to follow the principle of enjoining good and prohibiting the evil. The author raised the pertinent question on the nature of Shura and the rights of non-Muslim minorities. In his own words: “What is the true nature of *shura*? How is the principle to be expressed, and how may it be participated in? What sort of institutions need to be established in order to realize *shura*? How the Ummah to be prepared to make use of *shura*? How are the circumstances of the Ummah’s history to be analyzed in order that lessons may be drawn from it? What is to be the effect of fiqh on the

Islamic political thought, practice, and institutions? How is the Ummah to be involved practically in the political process? What are the means of bringing the Ummah to a state of political competence? What kinds of institutions are needed for such an undertaking? What guarantees can contemporary scholars of political science glean from the teachings of Islam, which could be presented at a legislative and institutional level, about preventing a ruler from abusing his/her office and toying with the Ummah's rights? What guarantees and fundamental concepts can be presented to the non-Muslim minorities living in Islamic states? How can they participate in the politics and government of a clearly Muslim-majority state?" [pp 232-233]. Dr. Al-Alwani emphasized the need to work for understanding the goals and purposes of Islam in order to develop a complete system of political thought that can interact with the contemporary realities in order to realize the greater purposes of Islam. The author stressed the need to use such tools as *maslahah mursalah* (the greater good), *istishab* (assessment of circumstances), *baraah* (legal license), *adah* (custom), *araf* (legal convention), *istiqrā* (induction), *istidlal* (deduction), *istihsan* (legal preference), *sad ad-dharai* (obstruction of pretexts), and *akhdh bi al-akhaff* (acceptance of the least imposing) in addition to primary sources of Quran, Sunnah, *ijma* (consensus of the scholarly community) and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning).

The most important article of this chapter is: 'Missing Dimensions in the Contemporary Islamic Movements'. Dr. Al-Alwani correctly diagnosed and identified that political power alone cannot be a prelude to reform. Rather, reform starts with addressing the numerous problems that caused degeneration [p 240]. He has highlighted some of the very fundamental weakness of the Islamic movements:

"Islamic movements have become tainted with a partisan mentality; and are now at odds with the Ummah's higher interest. Since they cannot carry out any form of collective work, they have become easy targets for those seeking to isolate or destroy them.

"Some of these movements have confused the sacred texts with human interpretations and jurisprudence derived from *ijtihad* based on these texts.

"This confusion of the divine and the human has resulted in some of these movements claiming that only they have the truth, thus conferring on their own human thought and *ijtihad* the sanctity of fundamental texts. In addition, they have expropriated the Ummah's historical achievements and taken credit for them by claiming that they are the only extension or embodiment of that historical reality.

"Some movements mistakenly believe that they can do without intellectual effort or *ijtihad* so long as they have the Quran and the Sunnah. Thus, they fail to link the Islamic text with the real world and lose the ability to actualize the faith. Some of them launch themselves as fully fledged "organizations" well before determining or reforming the world of their thoughts. As a result, they began to haphazardly select notions from the real world and Muslim tradition in order to respond to the

requirements of their organizations and everyday activities, instead of proceeding by sound and rational judgment.

“They have claimed to embody, through organization and membership - and to the exclusion of all other groups- the whole Ummah. This is no more than intellectual immaturity and a juvenile fondness for exclusiveness and theatrics.

“Despite their untiring verbal commitment to the Quran and the Sunnah, these movements have not drawn up any appropriate programs for themselves and thus display their members’ poor grasp of the methodological foundations of Islamic doctrines and the Shariah. As we know, methodology constitutes the cornerstone leading to the development of a comprehensive Islamic discourse that can implement Islam’s ultimate objectives.

“Since the beginning of modern contacts with the West, the Islamic discourse has been stranded between high and low tides, between progression and retrogression. At times when all-out mobilization of effort and resources was needed to ward off an outside danger, it rose to the occasion. However, during times of construction and development, the Islamic discourse seemed almost everywhere to be pathetically lacking in vigor and wholeness. Be that as it may, an analysis of the present Islamic discourse’s silent characteristics ought to instill in us more awareness toward rectifying its form and content in order to make more viable in an age fraught with intellectual and other challenges” [pp 256-258].

The last article of this chapter and also of the books is: ‘Authority: Divine or Quranic’? Dr. Al-Alwani while referring to the mistaking understanding of divine authority of many contemporary Islamic movements [p 287] underlined that divine authority is vested in the Quran. “The Quran may never become the exclusive domain of one group in the name of divine authority, owing solely to such people claiming to be the only ones capable of accessing and understanding it” [p 286]. “The Islamic understanding is that divine authority resides in His eternal message, the Quran, which is the word of God” [p 285]. The author here emphasized the supremacy of the Text of the Quran: “Authority resides in the Quran” [p 285]. “However, the important thing is that the Quran is to be understood and interpreted through human reading, for its discourse is directed towards human beings”[p 285]. The author here tried to draw a balance between divine sovereignty [pp 281-282] mundane exercises of authority in civil matters as vicegerents [p 289]. Dr. Al-Alwani hoped that “if the contemporary Islamic thought is able to correct its own mistakes, then God willing, it will not remain dormant ... If Muslims become serious about their responsibility ... they will begin to contribute to the building of a new and better world ...” [p 293].

This book will help the readers to understand the intellectual crisis Muslim community is facing today. The need of the hour is to review our intellectual heritage and legacy with a critical mind and reformulate newer methodology and options for restructuring our thought pattern. This book will no doubt help Muslim

social reformers in realizing the vital task lying ahead that need to be addressed with a view to bringing positive changes not only in the intellectual realm but also in the plan of actions. I am confident the book will be useful not only for general readers and academics but for those who work for social reform worldwide InshaAllah.

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