



## BOOK REVIEW

### THE CROSS AND THE CRESCENT: THE RISE OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM AND THE FUTURE OF MUSLIMS

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The exuberant zeal the world showed at midnight January 1, 2000 was a manifestation of great hopes for prosperity, peace and stability for the new millennium. Four years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many of these hopes have diminished as rampant crises, wars and calamities marked the new century. The intensity of the crises has risen significantly, especially after the 9/11 tragedy. Since then, there seems to exist a clear line dividing the Muslim world and the United States. The retaliation of the U.S. government after 9/11 was mostly seen as targeting Muslim nations.

*The Cross and the Crescent*, authored by Muhammad Arif, sheds some light on the behind-the-scene scenario of the U.S. political economy with interesting analyses focusing on the emergence of the Christian fundamentalist movements. They are said to be currently pulling the strings in the Oval Office to ensure that their faith-based agenda is accomplished. Arif establishes his argument by first presenting a brief history of the Presidential elections of the United States, starting from 1900 up to 2000. In the discussion, he attempts to piece together the missing links between politics and Christianity that apparently have very strong connections despite the American Constitution that clearly makes for the separation of state and religion.

The author highlights the puzzling outcome of the 2000 U.S. Presidential election in which Vice President Gore as the candidate of the incumbent party (Democrats) was defeated by George W. Bush despite the excellent Clinton-Gore performance in delivering economic growth, prosperity and global prestige to the country for the previous

eight years. The outcome seemed to defy the historically-proven relationship between economics and politics, i.e., good economic performance tends to favor the incumbent and vice-versa (pp. 2).

His curiosity to know the factors responsible for the puzzling result in 2000 led the author to look back to the history of past U.S. Presidential elections (pp. 7-12). From all the elections starting from 1896 to 2000, Arif finds that conventional economic wisdom could not explain the results of the 1952, 1968, 1980 and 2000 elections. To understand these outcomes, according to Arif, we have to move into the realm of *metaeconomics*. He defines metaeconomics as a phenomenon which arises when an individual or the members of a society (or group) gain consciousness of the issues and factors dealing with the *bigger reality*, over and above, and far beyond the knowledge of the existing economic reality (pp. 3). In other words, it goes beyond economics. With this in mind, the author looks into the factors responsible for the outcome of the U.S. Presidential election in 2000.

Chapter 2 of the book analyzes the distribution of popular and electoral votes captured by both candidates in the 2000 election. Bush managed to capture the Southern states<sup>1</sup> in the election where the majority of the population in these states is considered to be religious, uphold traditional values and consider morality as an important factor (pp. 21). The awareness of the importance of morality and values, according to the author, is due to the rising influence of Christian fundamentalism spreading across these states (pp. 20). Candidates who propagate abortion and the rights of homosexuals in their campaign, for example, would not gain the support of voters from this group since abortion and homosexuality are against their understanding of the teachings of Christianity. The emergence of a religious-conscious society in those states is attributed to the role played by the Evangelicals<sup>2</sup> and Christian fundamentalists. It is essential to comprehend this phenomenon because today, the influence of this movement has snowballed and the 2000 election indicates the initial progress of this movement's bigger agenda. Arif believes that this factor will continue to be one of the most influential determinants of future U.S. Presidential elections, the policies of the U.S. and the rest of the world (pp. 39). With hindsight of the 2004 elections that saw another Bush victory, Arif's conclusions seem to be strengthened even further.

The next three chapters of the book describe the history of

Christianity in America (Chapter 3), the emergence of Christian fundamentalism (Chapter 4) and the grip of power the Evangelists and Christian fundamentalists managed to have (Chapters 4 and 5) in their long quest of struggle to power and recognition in the country. Once plagued with a problem of image, in which society was unsympathetic towards their approach and lack of intellectual strength to defend and advocate their cause (pp.60), Arif sees the post Second World War era as a period when they emerged with new strategies, approaches and agenda to turn the tide. Aiding them was the rampant decay of social and moral life of the Americans, brought about by the ideologies of rationalism and liberalism, which the Evangelists believe were against the fundamental teachings of Christianity.

To accomplish their mission, one of the Evangelists' most effective strategies was to use the mass media to spread their message. From the original position of non-political involvement, the movement started flexing its political muscle in the 1976 Presidential election and the following elections thereafter (pp. 81-111). This fact is evident as the author asserts:

“...The Christian fundamentalists, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had emerged as a formidable force on the American political scene and that no political party, whether Republican or Democrat, can make any significant headway in the elections without gaining their approval...” (pp. 109).

Another interesting fact highlighted is on the socioeconomic position of Christian fundamentalism (chapter 8). Arif finds that the socioeconomic conditions of the Southern states which voted for Bush in 2000 were worse compared to those states which voted for Gore. The author argues that poverty, lack of education and a sense of being a victim of social injustice put pressure on people to find answers and solutions to their problems. In their soul-searching process, many resorted to religious fundamentalism (pp. 137) as an alternative way to deal with the socioeconomic failures and injustices.

Once these religious fundamentalist beliefs are deeply rooted in the hearts of the masses, it is easy for the leaders to present their faith-based agenda as the masses are now loyal followers. With a strong faith in fundamentalist Christianity, they are greatly preoccupied with

their interpretations of the Bible in their worldview. For example, realizing biblical prophecies has long been the quest and purpose of the Christian fundamentalism (pp. 143-161). It is illuminating to note that presently, dominant Evangelists are putting relentless efforts to fulfill the Biblical prophecies especially those events leading to the 'end times' (pp.143-164). According to their belief, time would finally end with the Second Coming of the long-awaited Christ and also the establishment of the *Kingdom of God*. Currently, this belief is strongly held and dictates the minds of the fundamentalist Christian policymakers in the American Congress and the White House. The grip of their influence is even greater due to the dominant power Evangelicals now enjoy in the Republican Party under George W. Bush.

The crux of Arif's thesis lies in the heart of the book where he emphasizes the indispensability of this matter for nations that have strategic interests in U.S. actions and policies:

“...understand this new policies and the vision it inspires in Washington. Nations that ignore this reality and deal with the White House and the U.S. Congress and people under the old paradigm are destined to pay dearly for their ignorance.” (pp. 111).

Undoubtedly, this issue is very relevant to Muslim countries. Attacks and discriminations on Muslims especially in the Middle East are part of the fundamentalists' Biblical interpretations (pp. 165-174). After 9/11, Muslims have been the prime victims of retaliatory actions. Therefore, there is a critical need for Muslims to formulate new strategies and approaches to deal with this situation.

Blaming others for the current fate of Muslims will not solve the problems. The author points out that due to Muslims own ignorance (pp. 215), they always lose their ground in defending themselves from the West's accusation that the current terrorism is perpetrated by Muslim fundamentalists. This may not be a fair accusation. As Arif puts it:

“...the Christian fundamentalist movement is older, more active and stronger than the contemporary Islamic fundamentalist movement but thanks to the ignorance of Muslim scholars and the media about this fact, the opposite has always been

propagated and the Muslim world has also come to believe in these assertions of the western scholars” (pp.215).

This book amplifies the calls for Muslims to change in line with the teachings of the Holy *Qurʾān* (13:11). The reform and change in the world dominated by the West would require Muslims to also understand Western civilization from Muslim perspectives. Hence, the author sees an urgent need for Muslims to establish world class think-tanks to conduct serious studies on the United States, the European Union and Israel (pp. 244) since only by understanding these three hegemonic powers can we address attempts to materialize Huntington’s “Clash of the Civilizations”<sup>3</sup> thesis.

Indeed, Muslims’ *creative evolution* (pp. 215) cannot be delayed anymore. Knowledge is the key to power as it is proven by the history of Christian fundamentalisms’ success in gaining influence and control over the world’s sole superpower after very long decades of struggle. This is where Muslims today are left behind. Apart from that, the Christian fundamentalist movement also managed to implement its strategies in a subtle manner so much so that although the effects are felt, it seems to be untouchable and unstoppable. Muslims lack in the right and proper approach in presenting themselves to the world, as well as in undertaking their strategies effectively.

This work by Arif is a sincere expression of hope that Muslims take up the challenge. One could appreciate Arif’s book more if one also could read many of the writings that discuss the prophecies in *al-Qurʾān* and the role of prophecies in the religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Since all of these religions have their own grounds in claiming to be the true religion, scholars of each religion have their own understanding of their respective Scripture’s prophecies. The great danger lies in the wrong understanding and/or interpretation of the Scripture. The threat of self-fulfilled prophecies due to fanaticism poses another great danger in the future.

Indeed, the recent 2004 election in America seems to indicate that economic factors and reality are now less significant to a majority of the voters. Judging from Bush’s first term in the White House, almost all the achievements he inherited from the Clinton-Gore administration have disappeared quickly. America is currently facing a huge budget deficit and poor conditions of employment, health and security, coupled

with the present anti-American movement all around the world. Yet, Americans voted again for George W. Bush. Reading Arif's book will help to clarify why the 2004 results should not come as a surprise.

#### END NOTES

1. Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, West Virginia and Tennessee (pp. 20).
2. Evangelicalism is a phenomenon unique to Protestantism. Arif explains this briefly in pp. 76-7.
3. See for example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the New World Order*, N. Y. Simon & Schuster, 1996.
4. Imran N. Hosein, *Jerusalem in the Qur'ān: An Islamic View of the Destiny of Jerusalem including a Muslim Response to the Attack on America*, Dar al-Qur'ān, N.Y. 2002.

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