

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 28

Number 1

2020



International Islamic University Malaysia
<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 28

Number 1

2020

Editor

Ishtiaq Hossain (Malaysia)

Associate Editors

Anke Iman Bouzenita (Oman)
Khairil Izamin Ahmad (Malaysia)
Saodah Wok (Malaysia)

Book Review Editor

Mohd. Helmi Bin Mohd Sobri

Editorial Board

Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu (Nigeria)

Badri Najib Zubir (Malaysia)

Daniel J. Christie (USA)

Habibul H. Khondker (UAE)

Hazizan Md. Noon (Malaysia)

Hussain Mutalib (Singapore)

Ibrahim M. Zein (Qatar)

James D. Frankel (China)

Kenneth Christie (Canada)

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf (Malaysia)

Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman
(Malaysia)

Serdar Demirel (Turkey)

Syed Farid Alatas (Singapore)

Thameem Ushama (Malaysia)

International Advisory Board

Anis Malik Thoha (Indonesia)

Chandra Muzaffar (Malaysia)

Fahimul Quadir (Canada)

Habib Zafarullah (Australia)

John O. Voll (USA)

Muhammad al-Ghazali (Pakistan)

Muhammad K. Khalifa (Qatar)

Redzuan Othman (Malaysia)

Founding Editor

Afar Afaq Ansari (USA)

Intellectual Discourse is a highly respected, academic refereed journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It is published twice a year by the IIUM Press, IIUM, and contains reflections, articles, research notes and review articles representing the disciplines, methods and viewpoints of the Muslim world.

Intellectual Discourse is abstracted in *SCOPUS*, *ProQuest*, *International Political Science Abstracts*, *Peace Research Abstracts Journal*, *Muslim World Book Review*, *Bibliography of Asian Studies*, *Index Islamicus*, *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, *ATLA Religion Database*, *MyCite*, *ISC* and *EBSCO*.

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>

Email: intdiscourse@iium.edu.my; intdiscourse@yahoo.com

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298

Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 28, No. 1, 2020

Contents

Editorial

Ishtiaq Hossain 1

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists:
The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists
*Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar &
Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid* 5

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and
Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia
Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin 35

Examining the Role of ‘Ulama in the
Islamization Process of the Malay World
Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor 61

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam
in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World
Israr Ahmad Khan 77

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students:
Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment
Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba’ Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir 99

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning
Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan 129

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in
Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia
*Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman,
Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib* 149

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis <i>Khauthar Ismail</i>	171
Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr’s Legacy and Its Legitimacy <i>Mohd. Shah Jani & Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin</i>	195
Nigeria’s Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa <i>Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers, Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad & Amin Jaffri</i>	215
Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan’s Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework <i>Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak & Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin</i>	241
Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand <i>Siwach Sripokangkul</i>	261
Revisiting Southeast Asian Civil Islam: Moderate Muslims and Indonesia’s Democracy Paradox <i>M. Khusna Amal</i>	295
Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies <i>Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed</i>	319
<i>Book Reviews</i> States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East. By Laura Robson. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 247. ISBN 9785229215427 Reviewer: <i>Kaoutar Guediri</i>	345

Our Constitution. By Shad Saleem Faruqi. Subang Jaya,
Malaysia: Sweet & Maxwell, 2019, pp. 425.
ISBN 9789672187059 (paperback).
Reviewer: *Ramizah Wan Muhammad*

349

Metodologi Penyelidikan Dalam Pendidikan:
Amalan dan Analisis Kajian. By Ghazali Darusalam &
Sufean Hussin. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2019,
pp. 630. ISBN: 978-967-488-009-5.
Reviewer: *Khairil Husaini Bin Jamil*

353

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning

Rehnuma Bint Anis*
Md. Mahmudul Hasan**

Abstract: One of the greatest poets of the Victorian period, Robert Browning is taught universally from school through university levels. Given such magnitude, the multifaceted poet deserves research attention from various perspectives. A fascinating aspect of his poetry is that, in spite of his refusal to be labelled as a Christian, he displays strong faith in God and the afterlife. His poetry is steeped in religious connotations that derive heavily from the Bible. There are striking similarities between many concepts preached by Islam and Christianity. It will be interesting to view his poetry from the perspective of the former. Islam emphasises its own unique concepts and values to help its adherents achieve their vision of success. Browning, though accepting the central ideas of Christianity, deviates from it conceptually. Given this background, this article attempts to evaluate his notion of faith and its practice from Islamic perspectives and discover where the poet's ideas converge with those of Islam and where they differ.

Keywords: Robert Browning, Islam and English literature, comparative religion, Islam and Christianity, faith and practice, the Christian clergy

Abstrak: Salah seorang sasterawan tersohor zaman Victoria, Robert Browning, diajar dalam silibus dari peringkat sekolah hingga ke universiti di serata dunia.

* Rehnuma Bint Anis, PhD candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Email: rehnuma.anis@yahoo.com

** Md. Mahmudul Hasan, Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Email: mmhasan@iiu.edu.my

Kehebatan beliau sebagai seorang ahli sastera yang dinamik membuatkan karya-karyanya perlu diberi perhatian dan dikaji daripada pelbagai perspektif. Salah satu aspek unik dalam karyanya adalah keyakinan yang kuat terhadap Tuhan dan hari akhirat, meskipun beliau enggan dilabel sebagai Kristian. Tulisannya seringkali membawa konotasi agama yang diambil daripada kitab Injil. Terdapat banyak persamaan menarik antara konsep yang diajarkan oleh Islam dan Kristian. Justeru, amat penting dan menarik jika karya beliau dapat dinilai daripada perspektif Islam. Islam menekankan konsep dan nilai yang tersendiri dalam membantu penganutnya mencapai kejayaan dalam hidup. Meskipun Browning menerima idea-idea asas agama Kristian, beliau menyimpang daripadanya secara konseptual. Artikel ini cuba mengkaji idea Browning tentang konsep kepercayaan dan amalan daripada perspektif Islam. Ia juga cuba menemukan titik-titik persamaan dan perbezaan antara idea Browning dan ajaran Islam.

Kata Kunci: Robert Browning, Islam dan kesusasteraan Inggeris, perbandingan agama, Islam dan Kristian, kepercayaan dan amalan, ulama Kristian

Introduction

Robert Browning (1812-1889) stood firm as a “tower of light” amidst the chaos and confusion that swept over Victorian England in the wake of Darwinism and its use by atheists to vindicate their rejection of religion. He re-awakened faith in religion among his contemporaries instead of surrendering to the doubt that is often associated with the Poet Laureate Tennyson (1809-1892). Living through the turmoil of the Victorian era, he had to address the religious scepticism that threatened to swamp many of his contemporaries. He found his faith stronger after he had constructively dealt with his misgivings. One who believes and achieves a fruitful life through such a way grows more confident in their faith, and it is reflected in Browning’s words and actions. Pro-active rather than passive by disposition, Browning undertook to share his experiences of overcoming doubt and building confidence with his readers. In his approach to faith, he displays an empirical rather than a theoretical attitude towards its observance. His works as well as his life reflect his conviction that faith is effective only when applied to one’s thoughts, perceptions and actions to engender a spiritual transformation within the individual. Faith that fails to produce a positive change in the life and character of its adherents is either insufficient or practiced inadequately.

With age, Browning became more enthusiastic about faith. In fact, from 1850 onwards he never wrote without referring to religion. Browning was a monotheist (Ludick, 1936:15) who considered this life a test from God to determine who deserves rewards or punishment in the hereafter. Accounts of his character by friends and biographers describe him as a positive, respectable, sociable and robust man who believed in taking responsibility and making sacrifices for others and lived a life committed to family, friends and acquaintances – qualities highly valued universally. Even as he was explicitly reluctant to call himself a Christian (Buchanan, 1891:198), Browning used to go to church throughout his life. He was unwilling to identify himself as a Christian but had strong faith in God and the afterlife. Therefore, it will be interesting to examine the application of this faith in practice, which we will be considered in this article.

Demonstration of faith through practice

A true reflection of faith is in practice. Practice is not only an expression of faith but also elevates one's level of religious belief. Good practices, if divorced from faith, may not carry any spiritual significance. Knowing that their Creator loves them, cares about them, sustains them and will one day judge and reward or punish them restores the confidence of human beings in themselves. It provides them with a sense of responsibility and a purpose in life, which is to love God back, express gratitude for His bounties and perform righteous deeds to please Him. Thus, it is necessary not only to have faith but also to demonstrate its presence through one's words and actions.

Regarding faith and religious practices, Browning takes into account the notion of human frailty. He portrays the practices of faith in all levels among people from all walks of life, from the saint to the criminal, without ever judging them. He took into consideration their limitations and flaws but did not condemn them for these. Perhaps this generous, openhearted willingness to embrace all encouraged people to identify with the faith of Browning at a time when many were losing confidence in established religion and in the church.

According to Browning, it is not necessary to practise faith on a grandiose scheme. He is rather sceptical of people who do so. He is not impressed by the Bishop's act of ordering his tomb at Saint Praxed's church because it seems too worldly to be an act of faith. However, the

simple piety of Brother Lawrence in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (*Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842) impresses Browning because, according to him, it is not the amount of work but the attitude behind the deeds that carries more significance in matters of faith. Islam supports this view as the Qur’an reminds, “Is it not to God alone that all sincere faith is due?” (39:3). Paradise will be awarded for effort and sincerity rather than for the volume of deeds or the successes one achieves in earthly life.

Religion cannot and should not be imposed, and faith should be a matter of sincere devotion, not compulsion. Browning shows how the wretched eight-year-old Fra Lippo Lippi is forced to renounce all worldly pleasures for a “mouthful of bread”. A certain level of knowledge and understanding is required to love God sincerely, which can hardly be expected from a child who has been left on the street without care. Thus, in fact, the Carmelite church only took advantage of Lippi’s distress and destitution to compel him into a situation about which he had no idea. His moral transgressions even at a mature age testify to their failure to school him in religion in a true sense. Faith emanates from a heart overflowing with love of God and cannot be found in deeds done out of coercion without any divine inspiration behind them. This view corresponds with the Qur’an which states:

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. Distinct has now become the right way from the way of error: hence, he who rejects the powers of evil and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unailing, which shall never give way: for God is all-hearing, all-knowing. (2:256)

Once right and wrong have been demarcated, according to Islamic teachings, God leaves it to humans to decide which path to choose – good or evil – without any extraneous influence. Since God has given humans the right to elect, coercion in religious matters is out of the question.

Browning exhibits, in his works, a variety of experiences and outlooks towards people’s practices of faith. He purposely selects an array of characters from different strata of society to survey how they approach the matter differently based on their levels of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes towards the observance of faith as well as how they enact their beliefs in their distinct situations and circumstances. In what follows, we will scrutinise some examples of how he viewed the

connection between faith and its realisation of practice in the life of a believer.

Levels of faith practices

Browning's poems exemplify various perspectives and manifestations of faith through the words and actions of characters he portrays, from the grammarian who refuses to take interest in worldly life and prefers spending it in pursuit of knowledge to the murderer in "Fra Lippo Lippi" (ll 149-154) who enters a church only to elude his pursuers. Browning emphasises the necessity of creating a solid foundation for faith before one can act upon it. He declares in *Paracelsus* (1835):

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe:
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness; and around
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect clear perception — which is truth;

- Part I, ll 788-92

Verse 24:35 of the Qur'an indicates that this "inmost centre" is the heart "where truth abides in fullness". The "gross flesh" sometimes overshadows "the clear perception" but it is not beyond human capacity to polish this centre and let the light of truth shine within and overflow without. He repeats the insistence for a solid foundation for faith in "A Death in the Desert" (*Dramatis Personae*, 1864) where he urges people, through the persona of Christ's disciple John, to try to find proof of the existence of God in His creations rather than in miracles. Miracles can instil the seed of belief in the human heart at best, but the validation of faith must come from within.

The level of faith practices has little to do with one's material position in life. We find numerous pseudo-religious personages in Browning's poetry who are mentally and morally bankrupt in spite of their high positions in public life. Conversely, the poor nondescript girl in "Fra Lippo Lippi" (ll 158-162) repents her moral transgressions by making sacrifices at the church, which Browning presents in a positive light. Then there is the curious case of Johannes Agricola who professes: "I lie where I have always lain, / God smiles as He has always smiled" ("Johannes Agricola in Meditation," ll 11-12). The ambition of

a believer is to always strive for perfection even when it is out of reach: “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp” (“Andrea del Sarto”, l 97). However, Agricola does nothing to reflect that yearning of the human soul.

Faith lends vitality to one’s work. Andrea del Sarto regrets that he, in spite of his mastery of shapes and lines, can never reach the level of Michelangelo in art, because he lacks the kernel of spirituality that invests Michelangelo’s work with a higher purpose than just the achievement of a flawless appearance. This spiritual failure stains Andrea’s life. He takes money for commissions from his patrons but he does not complete the assigned work, nor does he return the amount he takes for the work back to the patrons. Yet he is unable to win the heart of the woman for whom he commits this breach of trust. Even though she is married to him, she is more invested in her “cousins” – a euphemism for her extramarital affair. Not only does she indulge in her adulterous affairs herself, she also makes him help her by conferring various favours upon her lovers. Yet, he has neither self-respect nor moral courage to let her go and start his life anew.

The lack of faith itself can be more dangerous. It can make one amoral because they do not feel accountable for their actions as is the case with the Duke in “My Last Duchess” (*Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842) who has such overweening pride in his “nine-hundred-years-old-name” that he cannot appreciate the simplicity and innocence of his wife. So he “gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (ll 45-46). He has no compunctions about having taken a life on such insubstantial grounds. Instead, he considers it an achievement, much like Neptune taming a seahorse or collecting valuable rarities. Neither does he feel any hesitation in looking for a bride with a larger sum of dowry soon after. The absence of a sense of accountability turns him into a self-serving, conniving monster while he does not even realise it.

Interestingly, Islam too speaks of various standards of faith ranging from the faithless, the hypocrites, the weak of faith and the mediocre to those who achieve excellence. The difference is based on the level of sincerity and on the implementation of faith in everyday life. Islam suggests that each human being is different from others and it is unrealistic to expect all to reach similar heights. It only presents them with the challenge, “vie with one another in seeking to attain to your

Sustainer's forgiveness, and thus to a Paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, which has been readied for those who have attained to faith in God and His Apostle" (Qur'an, 57:21). It is up to the individual to exert himself towards the ideal and reach as far as humanly possible. The outcome depends on the sincerity with which the believer exerts himself to attain the forgiveness of their Lord rather than how far one has made the journey because God can uplift His worshippers beyond their merits.

Religious practices among the Christian clergy

Browning's treatment of the practices of the Christian clergy deserves special attention as he devotes a significant portion of his poetry to depict them. In spite of his firm belief in "all that is noble and beautiful in Christianity" (Ludick: 15), Browning had little confidence in the Christian clergy. A considerable portion of his poetry analyses the greed and corruption that characterised the clerical bodies of the time. However, Browning's criticism of the clergy was more of a good-natured nudge, aimed to awaken them to their problems for which people were losing faith in the church, than an all-out attack against the institution itself. A scrutiny of some of Browning's poems will suffice to determine what he wanted the clergy to correct.

Browning's "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" (*Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842) deals with the theme of the objectification of God. Here the poet maintains serious reservations, as objectifying God renders theology baseless and makes humans stagnant. Johannes Agricola (1494-1566), a contemporary of Martin Luther (1483-1546), and other reformers held strong faith in the theology propagated by Luther, who taught that salvation is not earned by good deeds alone, rather it is a free gift from God. Previously, all denominations of the Christian church agreed that "salvation is jointly effected by humans and by God, by humans through marshalling their will to do good works and thereby to please God and by God through His offer of forgiving grace" (Hillerbrand, 2010). Luther broke dramatically with this tradition by asserting that "humans can contribute nothing to their salvation: salvation is, fully and completely, a work of divine grace" (Hillerbrand, 2010). In the beginning, Agricola's utterances seem pious and sincere, as he states that his purpose is to "get to God" (16) which should be the aspiration of every believer. He trusts the providence of God Who ordains "circumstances,

every one / To the minutest” (l 17-18) based on His sovereignty and perfection of knowledge. However, whereas he praises God for saving him “ere suns and moons could wax and wane” (l 13), he presumes that the same God has “foredoomed” some of His other creations without any plausible reason in either case. Here we begin to doubt his words and start scrutinising their underlying significance. While he claims a spiritual prosperity comparable to a tree-like growth towards heaven, his own words rather indicate a static spiritual condition. This renders Agricola’s false sense of security of being “[g]uiltless forever” (l 23) ironic because he does nothing towards engendering spiritual development in himself. Yet he maintains that, those “whose life on earth aspired to be / One altar-smoke, so pure!” (l 46-47) are condemned already, “all their striving turned to sin” (l 50), without any acceptable logic. Agricola’s negligence involves his belief. As he states:

I have God’s warrant, could I blend
 All hideous sins, as in a cup,
 To drink the mingled venoms up,
 Secure my nature will convert
 The draught to blossoming gladness fast ...

- ll 33-37

This smugness is unhelpful because it promotes a life with no obligation to God’s moral laws. Agricola’s God is one-dimensional. He does not want “a God to interact with, to plead with, ask and adore, rather he wants a god to look at and set his sinful mind at ease” (Osborn, 2017). Browning does not condone this kind of false comfort where God becomes an object instead of a being Who has absolute authority to punish or forgive whomever He wants. Browning makes his view about the drastic effects of conceptualising “justification by faith” clear. He cannot accept a theology that does not inspire man to win God’s love through effort and dedication. It resonates with the Qur’anic philosophy as encapsulated in the following verse:

No bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another’s burden;
 and if one weighed down by his load calls upon another to
 help him carry it, nothing thereof may be carried by that
 other, even if it be one’s near of kin. Hence, thou canst truly
 warn only those who stand in awe of their Sustainer, although
 He is beyond the reach of their perception, and are constant
 in prayer, and know that whoever grows in purity, attains to

purity but for the good of his own self, and that with God is all journeys' end. (35:18)

It makes sense that a just God will not make anyone carry another person's burden of sin irrespective of their closeness in kinship or kindred spirit. Similarly, it is illogical and unjust to make one person carry the burden of the sins of humankind. Everyone must work individually towards earning the pleasure of God in ways that He has ordained. This clearly establishes Browning's concept of action pertaining to faith and resonates with the following Qur'anic verse:

And God shall say: "And now, indeed, you have come unto Us in a lonely state, even as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind whatever that We bestowed on you in your lifetime. And We do not see with you those intercessors of yours whom you supposed to have a share in God's divinity with regard to yourselves. Indeed, all the bonds between you and your earthly life are now severed, and all your former fancies have forsaken you!" (6:94)

Islam emphasises individual responsibility of human beings who will be accountable for their own behaviour and actions in the hereafter.

Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" represents the eternal clash between good and evil. The soliloquist inadvertently reveals his own impure and evil mind when he spews hatred towards Brother Lawrence as well as his simple piety and innocence. He possesses a superior level of intelligence but it serves him little better than to embellish his ravings. Seen in terms of *Paradise Lost* (1667), Brother Lawrence would surely represent Adam and the speaker, a prototype of Satan. The poet demonstrates how hatred consumes the hater rather than the hated. Brother Lawrence, oblivious of the hatred of the soliloquist, tends to his garden separating the myrtle and the rose in different pots. Milton (1609-1674) intertwines the myrtle and the rose in *Paradise Lost* (1667) as a horticultural emblem of man's two spiritual states. In the terminology of William Blake (1757-1827), the rose symbolises the "innocence" man is about to lose and the myrtle represents the "experience" he is about to gain. Instead of appreciating the spiritual significance of the action, the speaker rants blasphemously against the unsuspecting Brother, growling: "Hell dry you up with its flames!" (l 8). He is not able to cause any actual harm, but finds pleasure in enacting small sabotages like keeping the budding fruits "close nipped on the

sly” (l 48). The speaker admits, involuntarily, that Brother Lawrence is impervious to the temptations of the flesh. However, the soliloquist himself is susceptible to the lust of the village girls on the riverbank, even as he expresses abhorrence of “scrofulous French novels” (l 57). Brother Lawrence is too dull to be ensnared by theological arguments or even to notice the soliloquist’s attempts to provoke or humiliate him. Still, the speaker finds satisfaction in mocking him, perhaps because he finds the impenetrable goodness of the Brother too bright in comparison to his own blackened soul. In the end, much like Goethe’s Faust, the speaker is prepared to barter away his own salvation for the damnation of Brother Lawrence. Browning’s advice here is to ignore the malice and connivance of schemers and continue to do good deeds. The Qur’an maintains: “Since good and evil cannot be equal, repel thou evil with something that is better – and lo! He between whom and thyself was enmity may then become as though he had always been close unto thee, a true friend!” (35:34). By persisting to do good deeds sincerely, no matter how simple or little, one can defeat the forces of evil.

Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” (*Men and Women*, 1855) exposes the evils that can overtake people when they practise religion without comprehending its necessity or its significance properly. Street guards seize Fra Lippi when he comes out of an alley, past midnight, “where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar” (line 6). They are flabbergasted to find a monk in such disreputable circumstances, but he does not seem to have any scruples about it. Rather, he freely admits his escapade, flaunts his connections to his illustrious patron, the Cosimo of the Medici, threatens one of the guards to paint his face as the model for Judas and bribes them to squeeze his way out of the predicament. He assures them thus:

Oh, the church knows! Don’t misreport me, now!
It’s natural a poor monk out of bounds
Should have his apt word to excuse himself ...
- ll 340-42

We are intrigued to know what causes him to break “out of bounds” and what makes him so confident that the church will accept his excuse. We find out that Lippi has solid grounds for his argument. Rules and regulations cannot control people unless the legislations are supported by motivation to implement them. This motivation comes from the love of God and fear of accountability to Him. However, it is also crucial that

the rules take into account human necessities and weaknesses. Lippi complains that the rule prohibiting monks to get married is unnatural:

I always see the garden and God there
 A-making man's wife: and my lesson learned,
 The value and significance of flesh,
 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.
 - ll 266-69

Islam denounces monastic asceticism because it amounts to the suppression of nature and creates an impediment to the development of life. The Qur'an encourages marriage, saying:

And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out
 of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them,
 and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this,
 behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!
 (30:21)

The relationship between husband and wife is significant, as it endows them with a sense of responsibility, motivates them and keeps them rooted in the familial, domestic world, as it allows their natural desires to be fulfilled in a harmonious way. When this natural urge is prohibited, as in Lippi's case, it finds escape in immoral ways like his midnight trysts.

Lippi acknowledges that the church rescued him from starvation and provided him with shelter on condition that he should renounce worldly life. To the eight-year-old orphan, it seemed like a decent bargain for "the good bellyful" (l 103), "the warm serge and the rope that goes all round" (l 104) and "day-long idleness" (l 105) where he does not have to worry about his next meal. He admits that he genuinely gave up the world with its "pride and greed" (l 98), "[p]alace, farm, villa, shop, and banking-house" (l 99). However, he is candid about his inability to subdue the flesh:

I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds:
 You should not take a fellow eight years old
 And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
 - ll 223-25

His lack of conviction in the teachings of the church is not the full extent of his problem though. He has manifold frustrations that lead him to

“play the fooleries you catch me at” (l 253). His patrons put pressure on him to undertake work with which he is not comfortable, insisting on subject matters he does not find interesting and admonitions to only “paint the souls of men” (l 183). He is supposed to paint these pictures to draw in the crowds of worshippers, to increase their faith; yet it does not help elevate the spiritual conditions of people who work for the church themselves, because even the Prior himself is not free from corruptions. Fra Lippi mentions the “Prior’s niece” suggestively several times though the Prior denies it:

Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
 She’s just my niece ...
 - ll 195-6

However, the words he uses to refute the charge themselves indicate the truth of the allegation. Hence, Lippi asks, logically, “Come, what am I a beast for?” (l 81). Through Lippi’s character, Browning expresses his opinion that faith without comprehension lacks motivation. Religion must not be made so difficult that one fails to put it into practice. When leaders of religious institutions become corrupt, the followers will be in disarray in spite of their efforts; and when one begins to transgress boundaries, after a while they do not feel guilty or ashamed to indulge in sins. The Qur’an in verse 2:286 reassures that God does not impose human beings with what they cannot bear. Browning appears to be in accord with the Qur’an in this respect, as he maintains that imposition without taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of adherents is counter-productive, perhaps even downright destructive.

Browning’s poem “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (*Men and Women*, 1855) is based on the figure of Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman (1802-1865), the controversial figure of the ‘papal aggression’, whose speech in 1850 on the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England caused misunderstanding and resentment among both the Catholic and Protestant circles. Browning’s poem came five years later and was interpreted diversely by various people. Browning, as usual, refused to comment, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. Wiseman himself is said to have commented that the Bishop is characterised as a “fat and pampered sinecurist who eats tithe-pigs and flourishes on the fears and superstitions of his neighbours” (Simpson, 1856). Wiseman denies that the portrait reflects a true picture of his own religious condition. As Hutton contends: “I believe ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’ to be ... a

serious defence of faith, a serious statement of the case for belief; that in ‘Blougram’ we have in germ the deepest thoughts that Browning ever uttered” (1929:26). The poet himself, according to Chesterton, said, “I intended it for Cardinal Wiseman, but I don’t consider it a satire, there is nothing hostile about it” (1925:201). All these contradictory arguments can be resolved by a straightforward reading of the poem, which may suggest that, Blougram is actually a very complex person who is probably attracted to faith just as much as he is enamoured by the desire for power, wealth and luxury. Nevertheless, all of Blougram’s arguments display an affirmation of faith and its power whether his practice of it matches with his assertions or not. While he believes in miracles, he also feels the need to keep pace with the new knowledge of the age and is open to assimilating with contemporary thought where possible. Gigadibs accuses Blougram of not being intelligent enough to realise the impossibility of possessing the level of faith his official position implies, simultaneously criticising him for not being ascetic enough for his faith. Gigadibs’ attack is because of Blougram being a Catholic Bishop rather than a Christian. Interestingly, Blougram’s reply is intended to proclaim the validity of some form of Christianity rather than defend the religious tenets of Catholicism itself. The poem adopts, in essence, a non-sectarian approach to faith. Blougram even allows the provision of doubt, which he thinks ultimately increases faith when one deals with it appropriately:

No, when the fight begins within himself,
 A man’s worth something. God stoops o’er his head,
 Satan looks up between his feet--both tug--
 He’s left, himself, i’ the middle: the soul wakes
 And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!
 Never leave growing till the life to come!
 - ll 693-98

The eternal growth of a person must find fulfilment in the next life. Blougram’s eloquent speeches are sincere because they are not spoken in his own defence but to uphold the honour of his faith. It is this sincerity that convinces the sceptical and materialistic Gigadibs in the end and he goes to Australia on his quest for faith. Through Blougram’s character, Browning shows that faith can be propagated by anyone, anywhere, at any time even if the moral character of the person preaching it is ambiguous because it is the faith rather than the person promulgating it that draws the believer. Gigadibs’ scepticism is vanquished not by

Blougram but by his faith. The Qur'an also gives supreme importance to the primordial message of Islam, stating: "And say: 'The truth has now come [to light], and falsehood has withered away: for, behold, all falsehood is bound to wither away!'" (17:81). Browning's poem recognises the power of religious faith when confronted by the lack of faith. Thus, it is more of a commentary on the relationship between doubt and faith than a caricature of Cardinal Wiseman. The lack of practice of a faithful person can call his religious belief into question. Personal flaws of a follower or his negligence in observance do not invalidate religion itself.

Browning visited the Basilica of Santa Prassede in Rome in October 1844. He was disenchanted by the ostentation and luxurious ornamentation of the church in spite of it being named after a virgin saint who gave her wealth to the poor and to the Church. Through the words of the dying Bishop in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" (*Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, 1845), Browning exposes, in Ruskin's words, the church with "[i]ts worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin" (1903: 6, 449). In his deathbed, the Bishop sermonises his heirs on the dangers of vanity but ends it with instructions to build him an ornate and extravagant tomb. He persuades his heirs to fulfil his wishes with offers of villas with luxurious baths, horses, "[a]nd mistresses with great smooth and marbly limbs" (l 75). A lot of what he asks for his entombment is not for any noble purpose or necessity but for flaunting his superiority over Gandolf, his predecessor in life and death, out of jealousy and rivalry. Strangely, in spite of being a man of religion, instead of speaking of salvation and seeking an afterlife in heaven, he envisions his grave as an extension of his worldly life. The erosion of values after the Renaissance, apparently, did not only affect unscrupulous people like the Duke in "My Last Duchess" but also influenced the religious classes such as the Bishop. The poem also showcases Browning's knowledge of the scriptures. According to Monteiro (1970), the Bishop may be accused of apostasy if we consider the significance of the stones – particularly agate, lapis lazuli, marble and jasper – in juxtaposition to the scriptures which refer to them specifically in the context of God's throne, transcendence and salvation. Browning shows how the Bishop imagines his grave as comparable to the throne of God and attributes to himself godlike functions with his sons performing sacerdotal duties.

Ultimately, his craze for the splendour of paganism wins over Christian asceticism. He uses his final moments to give instructions to build a blatantly unchristian monument over his grave as a tribute to his body and earthly life rather than speak to his progeny of spiritual salvation and transcendent life. Bonner wondered if the Bishop is indeed “convinced of the emptiness of life, the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of the hereafter” (*The Explicator*, March 1964). As Perrine contends, the life the Bishop looks forward to in the grave “will be as sensual, as selfish, and as materialistic – in an abstract, passive way – as the life he has lived in the past” (*The Explicator*, October 1965). Hence, essentially, the Bishop has rejected the Christian concept of salvation. Without hope of salvation and hope in Resurrection, he fears all he will get in the end will be:

Stone —
 Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
 As if the corpse they keep were oozing through —
 - ll 115-17

It will be interesting to compare it to the tradition of Prophets in the Bible and in the Qur’an who advised their progeny about obedience to God and about righteousness. For example, in the Qur’an, Luqman (Peace Be Upon Him further referred as PBUH),¹ a wise man, advises his sons in his deathbed, to be grateful to God in order to be true to themselves. He warns them against ascribing divinity to anything else besides God because such an action is a great sin against Him. He admonishes them to refrain from sin as nothing is hidden from the sight of God. Luqman (PBUH) instructs them to be constant in prayer, to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and to be patient in adversity. He cautions them against pride and haughtiness and counsels them to be modest and to check their voices as “the ugliest of all voices is the loud voice of asses ...” (Qur’an, 31:17). Juxtaposing the two deathbed scenes, the worldly way in which the Bishop conducts himself right up to his death is indefensible. Browning was not a great practitioner of Christianity, but he hated anthropomorphism in any

¹ There is a debate among scholars about the prophethood of Luqman (PBUH). The Qur’an regards him as a man on whom exceptional wisdom was bestowed and as someone who acted upon divine prompting. A chapter in the Qur’an is named after him.

form. The Bishop's attempt to take the place of his own god disgusts him. Materialism was central to the life of the Bishop. Nevertheless, he carried it to a completely new level by reflecting it into the construction of his grave which should ideally be an austere resting place instead of an attempt to extend the grandeur and temptations of life. Browning believes that being an exponent of faith does not automatically translate to practising it with sincerity. The disparity between the public religion of the Christian clergy and the vanity of their private inclinations disillusioned the confused public during the Victorian era. It is these sanctimonious pretensions that Browning contests in his poems in order to encourage the Christian institutions to overcome their foibles and work towards genuine piety.

Practice increases the level of faith

Browning contends that the practices of faith should be kept simple and within the limits of human capability. Forcing nature beyond its capacity leads to no good. Ecclesiastical characters like Fra Lippo Lippi and Bishop Blougram disappoint expectations due to unrealistic outlooks. Faith finds expression most naturally when two aspects – willingness and achievability – are combined. As the Qur'an states about the followers of Jesus (PBUH)

[A]nd in the hearts of those who truly followed him We engendered compassion and mercy. But as for monastic asceticism – We did not enjoin it upon them: they invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. But then, they did not always observe it as it ought to have been observed: and so We granted their recompense unto such of them as had truly attained to faith, whereas many of them became iniquitous. (57:27)

This confirms that even with good intentions, it is not a good idea to burden oneself with more than what one is humanly able to perform. Human beings are inherently weak and each person's strengths and weaknesses lie in different areas. Therefore, it is perhaps not advisable to expect the same level of perfection from everyone.

Faith manifests itself in different ways, producing multifarious results depending on the person putting it into practice. For example, the grammarian in Browning's "A Grammarian's Funeral" (*Men*

and Women, 1855) has so much faith in God and the afterlife that he postulates confidently:

“What’s time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
 Man has Forever.”
 - ll 83-84

He has no attraction for life apart from the opportunity it offers to acquire knowledge and is convinced that there will be enough time for enjoyment in the hereafter. Browning neither questions nor endorses this attitude; he simply shows it is possible to practice faith at this level if one chooses. Brother Lawrence in “Soliloquy” finds God in the simple pleasures of life such as his garden and his meals, which does not detract him from piety in any way.

Browning posits his most elaborate view about the practice of Christianity in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* (1850) and *La Saisiaz* (1878). In the former, he confirms his stance that faith should not be divided into denominations and one should be allowed to choose their personal method of worship. The latter is a point where his view of the formal observance of religion differs from that of Islam. Religion aims to gather all humanity under the canopy of a universal fraternity. As the Qur’an affirms: “All believers are but brethren” (49:10). This is why religions formulate codes of conduct and specific formats of worship for their followers. So, while one is allowed a certain level of freedom in the practice of religion, one must abide by some basic rules to connect him to his fellow believers.

Admittedly, it is not easy to persevere in the practice of religion for a lifetime. People’s humanistic and animalistic tendencies keep fluctuating and sometimes doubt overtakes the mind. Ultimately, what enables one to continue the effort to overcome one’s limitations is the love of God and the love for God. Browning’s *La Saisiaz* (1878) advances the notion that the best policy is to surrender to God with humility:

I shall bear as best I can;
 By a cause all-good, all-wise, all-potent? No, as I am man!
 Such were God:
 - ll 334-6

God will compensate His servants for every suffering they have undertaken for His sake. One of the trials that a believer faces is to constantly battle the forces of doubt. Faith is not an inflexible standard but a reserve of strength within the human spirit. Once a person has overcome doubt and triumphed over it, his faith grows stronger. Practising faith requires effort and sincerity and upholding it for a lifetime is a struggle. The Qur'an affirms that it is not even possible to hold onto faith without "patience and prayer" (2:45). Whenever there is negligence, lethargy, lack of sincerity, or excess of pride in one's achievements, the quality of one's faith suffers. Constant practice helps believers continue the on-going battle against the perils of doubt and sloth. This oscillation continues throughout life. A believer can be at different levels of faith during various phases of life, within the span of a single day, or even a single minute for that matter. The effort to hold onto one's belief under all circumstances and the expression of faith through deeds symbolises a believer's dedication towards their creed. It requires humility to maintain the struggle throughout a lifetime. The triumph of a believer lies in sustaining their efforts to achieve perfection in the hereafter for the love of God.

Although Browning did not necessarily approve of the Christian method of worship, he attended church regularly throughout his life (Ludick, 1936:12). He took the scriptures seriously and was thoroughly conversant with them. From all accounts, he was humble, amiable and sociable and remained so even after becoming famous worldwide. He kept in touch with friends and family members and took care of them. His patient care of his sickly wife, Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806-1861), who passed away before him is worth a mention. He was also a loving father to his son. He was patient through the trials and tribulations of life and his faith in God remained unwavering to the end, growing even stronger in later phases of his life. He could not accept all aspects of Christianity but he adhered to those teachings of the religion in which he believed sincerely.

Conclusion

It cannot be said with full certainty whether or not Browning ever came in touch with Islam or had adequate understanding of the religion, but his concepts regarding faith and its implementation in life have resonances with those of Islam. The crux of the Islamic principle is

the notion of accountability to God for one's actions, which dictates that human beings are allowed to make their own choices in life. They will face God one day and will be rewarded or punished in the afterlife according to the choices they made and actions they committed in this world. With this prospect in the future, faith is maintained through a system of regular worship for its adherents to maintain a constant connection with God, to remember Him and His boundaries and to protect them from transgressions which are deemed to be harmful for themselves or for others. In spite of being a regular church-goer throughout his life, Browning's perception of religion largely concerned personal responsibility rather than enforcement of observance by a ruling ecclesiastic authority.

According to Browning, only the individual can recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and they must decide for themselves how to maintain the boundaries recommended by God. Despite his distinct approach to faith, Browning did not believe in dividing religion into denominations or embellishing it with ostentations. Poems like "Bishop Blougram's Apology" reflect his urge for a unified stance on matters of faith. His aversion for ostentation in matters of religion is reflected in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church."

Browning believes that, the focus of the practices of faith should be to achieve the acceptance of God instead of the approbation of humans. Browning hated hypocrisy in all matters and even more so in matters of faith. Thus, the corruption of the religious institutions, preserving only a thin veneer of piety, irked him. He portrayed everything with his characteristic openhearted generosity that embraces all humans without judging or condemning them, because his aim was not to disparage certain people or traditions or flaws in religious practices but to awaken people to the importance of sincerity in beliefs and righteousness in actions. He believes that religion constitutes a personal connection with God and every individual is responsible for their faith and deeds. As such, no one except God has the right to pass a judgement on these matters. According to Browning, the practice of faith should emanate from the sincerity and effort of the believer and God will make the ultimate judgement.

References:

- Bonner, F. W. (1964). Item 57, *The Explicator*, Vol XXII. Washington D.C.: Heldref Publications.
- Buchanan, R. W. (1891). *The Outcast: A Rhyme for the Time*, Sydney: Wentworth Press.
- Chesterton, G. K. (1925). *Robert Browning*. London: Macmillan and Company. p 201
- Hillerbrand, H. J., Encyclopaedia Britannica [Ed.] (2010). Martin Luther, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Illinois, USA <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Luther>
- Hutton, J. A. (1929: 1903). *Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith*. London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier.
- Ludick, J. (1936). *Christ in the Poetry of Robert Browning*. Master's Thesis. Loyala University, Chicago. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/269/
- Monteiro, G. (1970). The Apostasy and Death of St. Praxed's Bishop. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/bishop/monteiro3.html>
- Osborn D. (2017). Poetry spotlight: "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" by Robert Browning. *Deep Down Things*. <https://drakeosborn.com/2017/08/14/poem-of-the-week-robert-brownings-johannes-agricola-in-meditation/>
- Perrine, L. (1965). Item 12, *The Explicator*, Vol XXIV. Washington D.C.: Heldref Publications.
- Ruskin, J. (1903). *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Vol 6. London: George Allen
- Simpson, R. (1856). Browning's Men and Women, *The Rambler*, N.S., V
- The Holy Qur'an* (1980), Muhammad Asad [Tr], Gibraltar: Dar-al-Andalus Ltd.
- Ward, W. P. (1897). *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, Vol II. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

In This Issue

Editorial

Articles

Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar & Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists: The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists

Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia

Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor

Examining the Role of 'Ulama in the Islamization Process of the Malay World

Israr Ahmad Khan

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World

Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba' Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students: Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment

Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning

Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman, Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia

Khauthar Ismail

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis

Mohd. Shah Jani & Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin

Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr's Legacy and Its Legitimacy

Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers & Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad Amin Jaffri

Nigeria's Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa

Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak & Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin

Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan's Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework

Siwach Sripokangkul

Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand

M. Khusna Amal

Revisiting Southeast Asian Civil Islam: Moderate Muslims and Indonesia's Democracy Paradox

Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed

Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies

Book Reviews

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

