

Book Review

***Fitrah* and Human Nature**

Human Nature in Islam by Yasien Mohamed. Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1998. Pp. 207. ISBN: 983-065-063-4.

Reviewer: Amber Haque, Department of Psychology, IIUM.

The modern man is unable to find peace and tranquility despite all his worldly achievements. The problem actually lies in the modern man's inability to realize his innate spiritual nature. It is only through a discovery of the origin of his moral intuitions that the modern man can come to know his Creator and ultimately find peace.

In this scholarly work the author describes in detail the concept of human nature or *fitrah* from an Islamic perspective. It examines what some of the greatest Islamic scholars have said about *fitrah*, and also compares the views of Darwin, Freud, and Skinner to the Islamic explanation of human nature. The author believes that the concept of *fitrah* can explain many aspects of social life, including the religions revival, since man is aware of his own limitations through his sub-conscious mind and is instinctually attracted toward his search for the Creator. This characteristic of man is embedded in his spiritual nature.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one deals with the definition of the term *fitrah* from both linguistic and religious perspectives. While *fitrah* linguistically means an inborn disposition, in Islam, it is associated with the declaration of *shahādah*—there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Thus, it is in man's *fitrah* to accept the religion of Truth. Since man is also endowed with the quality of intelligence coupled with freewill, he can choose between right and wrong, and is accountable for his belief or disbelief in Allah. The author further clarifies the concept by saying what *fitrah* is not. *Fitrah* does not refer to one's psyche, outward behaviour, or the role of man, individually or collectively, in his society. *Fitrah* is man's natural predisposition for goodness and submission to one God.

In chapter two, the term *fitrah* is further clarified as given by classical, neo-classical and modern scholars. Within the classical view, the author describes the predestinarian, neutral, positive, *ṣūfī*, and

philosophical perspectives. Under the neo-classical and modern interpretations, he presents explanations given by scholars such as Ali as-Sabūnī, Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī, Sayyid Quṭb, Shah Walīullah, Ismāʿīl al-Fārūqī, Naquib al-Attās, and Muhammad Asad in a comparative perspective. He suggests that all scholars have something important to say, however, no single view can be regarded as “correct.” After a thorough review of different interpretations, he concludes that the “positive” explanation, which refers to the quality of “intrinsic goodness” within man best accords with the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, hence is the most appropriate interpretation. Particular reference is given to the works of Ibn Taymiyah whose view is that human soul possesses an innate guidance, while Islam provides adequate stimulus for this capacity and an avenue for the fulfillment of this need.

Chapter three deals with implications of *fiṭrah* and the nature of relationship between *fiṭrah* and the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, psychological, volitional, and legal aspects of man’s existence. In order to understand the concept of *fiṭrah* it is essential to understand the metaphysical principle which aids in comprehending the place of man in the universe and his ultimate destiny. Embedded in this principle are the concepts of *tawḥīd*, *shahādah*, and *khilāfah* that are integral to *fiṭrah* and govern the metaphysical implications. Accordingly, all other implications of *fiṭrah* are rooted in the metaphysical principle. At the epistemological level, man is innately inclined to worship Allah and the Islamic way is best suited for this purpose, because it recognizes all levels of perception in the man including the spiritual aspect unlike Western epistemology which caters primarily to the sensory aspects. In addition, man’s worship is not only confined to his belief and formal prayer to Allah, but in pursuing the right conduct, which is in harmony with *fiṭrah*. But even though, doing “right” is inherent in man’s *fiṭrah*, he also has the potential to do wrong, including *kufr* or denial of *tawḥīd*. The author further explains the psychological implications by describing the three levels of psycho-spiritual state of the *nafs* and the implications of the dominance of *nafs* over *fiṭrah*. The volitional (man’s potential to actualize his *fiṭrah*) and legal (man’s accountability to Islam) implications of *fiṭrah* with more diagrams and quotes from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth are also presented.

What is the relevance of *fiṭrah*? This issue is dealt in chapter four, which focuses on secularism and its origins and how it conflicts with the actualization of *fiṭrah*. A sketch of Christian theology suppressing the role of *aql* in perceiving the spiritual significance of *fiṭrah* is

noteworthy. Various schools of thought, like rationalism, positivism, pragmatism, existentialism, and behaviorism, and their influence on modern thinking have been described. The author points out that since Islamic epistemology recognizes both the phenomenal and metaphysical dimensions of reality, the concept of *fitrah* encompasses both the spiritual and physical realities. He also indicates that today's graduates from secular and Islamic universities speak two different languages because of conflicting orientations that have led to conflicts in the Muslim social order. An Islamic response to secular thinking is only possible after a critical study of both modern disciplines as well as Islamic legacy. The reason why secular theories of human nature are in conflict with Islamic view of *fitrah* is because they ignore the transcendental dimension of the human constitution. Darwin's theory points to a secular view of man and neo-Darwinians suggest that life started by accident. Freudian propositions of human nature are highly pessimistic and deterministic. They offer no hope for happiness, resolution of inner contradiction or peace for man. This position is totally opposed to the Islamic view of *fitrah*, which is an internal source of guidance and is centered in the *rūh* (soul) and engenders the capacity to recognize and worship Allah. While one should give credit to Freud for his overall contribution to the study of human nature, there remains a need to challenge Freud's anti-religious overtones. The author criticizes the behaviorist point of view as well, which evolved in response to Freud's subjective interpretation and emphasizes empirical and objective study of man.

...Skinner's behaviorism is a reductionistic concoction of trial and error conjecture which is no more scientific than a science fiction movie. Hence the behaviorist model of reward and punishment and of the ideal socio-political condition is unrealistic. (p. 180)

Skinner's concept of values is also criticized as the values are defined in terms of environmental events and conditions which man can experience by means of his five senses. A Muslim believes in eternal values and for him material things should not take precedence over the eternal. The concepts of *jihād* and martyrdom, for example, cannot be explained by behaviorism, as they are not dependent on worldly reinforcers. The author clarifies that although man's *nafs* is the changing element, *fitrah* is fixed and the Islamic ideal is to create a harmony between the *nafs* and *fitrah* through a realization of the innate spiritual reality together with conscious manipulation of the phenomenal reality. *ʿAql* and *irādah* (intention) are the qualities that

differentiate man from other living creations and their proper use distinguishes the rightly guided individuals from the misguided ones.

The concluding section points out that although comprehensive in scope, the book's coverage on *fitrah* is certainly not exhaustive. This thesis however, is an improved attempt at developing an Islamic theory of human nature. It should stimulate further writings in formulating a more comprehensive framework of human personality. It is also a tool to "Islamize" the social sciences and eventually develop Islamic psychology as an independent discipline.

This book, no doubt, is an in-depth analysis of *fitrah*, succeeds in offering a constructive criticism of Western theories as well as in giving rational explanations for the Islamic alternative. With too many details, it is possible that a novice reader may get lost and confused in the philosophical explanations in some places. Works like these fill a void at a time when Islamic perspective in the social sciences is badly needed.

Authoritarianism and Economic Success

Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia by Anne Munro-Kua. England: Macmillan, 1996. ISBN 0-333-64491-3, Pages 199.

Reviewer: Alieu K. Jammeh, Department of Political Science, IIUM.

It is an indication of political maturity in Malaysia that many scholars are challenging the establishment and their policies. The author of this book takes up what she calls an apparent paradox in Malaysia whereby the state is recognized as economically successful as well as authoritarian, and yet the ruling Party has repeatedly obtained sweeping mandate at the polls. According to the author Malaysian political system involves extensive restrictions on civil liberties, despite the fact that the formal institutions of democracy remain in place. The author traces the origins and causes of such a contradiction as well as provides analysis on how it has been maintained and reinforced.

The author identifies colonial domination as the root cause of the apparent contradiction in Malaysia and shows how institutions were adopted and reinforced during the post colonial era. Thus, the emergency laws formulated to contain anti-colonial and labour movement disturbances were transformed into an equivalent law known as the Internal Security Act (ISA). In the economy, serious