

Book Review

Islam and Malaysian Society

Towards Actualizing Islamic Ethical and Educational Principles in Malaysian Society: Some Critical Observations, by M. Kamal Hassan. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1996. Pp. 283. ISBN 967-940-074-3.

Reviewer: Rosnani Hashim, Department of Education, IIUM

This book presents an analysis of the development of Malaysia from an ethical and Islamic perspective. The author is greatly concerned over them because these issues “relate fundamentally to the purpose and quality of life” (p. ix). It is the author’s contention that Malaysia will become another “soulless” modernized and industrialized society by the year 2020 if Malaysians fail to strengthen the God-given moral-spiritual values and principles. The society could easily be plagued with corrupt politics, individualism, tyranny of organized crimes, serious urban poverty, inner-city decay, broken families, the post-modernist culture of anarchy, assisted by the inundation of decadent values brought into the homes by satellite television facilities to produce a new generation of what Peter Drucker calls the “schooled barbarian” (p.xi).

According to the author, the underlying assumption of his work is the transcendent vision:

...the Muslim community is mandated by Allah to be the builders of a universal civilization which stands for the supremacy of the One True God, Truth, Knowledge, Justice and the unity of Soul and Matter, this World and the Hereafter, Power and Ethics, Material Progress and Spirituality, Religion and Science, Thought and Action with Prophet Muhammad as the exemplar *par excellence*. (p. x)

The book comprises eight chapters beginning with an historical perspective of Islamic intellectual patterns in the Malay-Indonesian

Archipelago and ending with a note on the future, that is, on some Muslim intellectuals' perspective of the Vision 2020. The other chapters consist of papers presented on various occasions between the seventies and nineties. These chapters give the reader a sense of perspective to the issues of concern. As maintained by the author,

...Each chapter, in fact, can stand on its own, bearing in mind its time-space context, but read together from the beginning till the end, the eight chapters indicate a progressive development of the scope of Islam in Malaysia. In sum, the book reflects a process of actualization of Islamic ethical and educational principles in a complex multi-cultural Malaysian society that is moving on fast track towards full industrial status by the year 2020. (p. xv)

The historical survey of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago sets the stage for the author's thesis. Colonization by the West in the eighteenth century caused Muslims to do some soul searching and this resulted in the reform or *al-Islāh* movement which attempted to recapture the dynamic and liberating spirit of Islam. The reformist group had definitely expanded the intellectual horizon of the Malay world. That there was a rift between the products of Western education and the traditional religious establishment which widened as both groups sought dissimilar and sometimes conflicting political affiliation is no longer a secret.

This led the author to assert in the second chapter the importance of an integrated and holistic education, where character development (*akhlāq*), religious knowledge (*'ulūm dīnīyah*), scientific knowledge (*'ulūm 'aqlīyah*) and commitment to positive social change (*'amal ṣālih*) are treated in a balanced manner. Definitely this is not an easy task especially in the area of the social sciences and humanities as illustrated by the author in his third chapter. Through his personal experiences the author related the resistance against the integration of revealed knowledge and the social sciences by the scientists and *'ulamā* themselves in the early 80s. He acknowledges that this resistance has decreased since the advent of "Islamization of knowledge" movement.

In continuity with the previous chapter, the author examines the extent of Islamization within the Malaysian society, especially as analysed by local and Western intellectuals such as Fred von der Mehden, Clive Kessler, J. Nagata and J. Funston. Although most of the analysts attributed Islamization or Islamic resurgence in the country to external factors, the author argues that this phenomenon could be

explained from the dynamism of Islam itself. He asks, "Are there not certain principles of ultimate concern in the Islamic resurgence which truly transcend the economic or political disenchantments of its protagonists? Is the Malay Muslim hopelessly incapable of acting and reacting on the basis of the primacy of non-economic and non-political principles?" (p. 83). The author suggests a few sound strategies for Islamization. In particular, he calls for the establishment of social, educational and economic institutions through the initiative of the *da'wah* groups themselves. This will serve the purpose of showing that Islam can solve all human problems.

In chapter five, a brief survey of the Islamization process in Malaysia is undertaken. The author concludes this survey on an optimistic note on the changes in the 80s and early 90s which indicated some progress in Islamization. The list of important developments includes the institutionalization of concrete Islamic programmes within the government, inculcation of Islamic values in the administration, encouragement of Islamic intellectual discourses in government departments and institutions of higher learning, reform of national education by incorporating Islamic perspectives and moral values, initiation of changes in the legal system to facilitate the growth and expansion of Islamic *shar'ah* court administration, removal of glaringly un-Islamic practices in the official ceremonies of government departments, eradication of the practice of charging interest on government loans for Muslims, establishment of an Islamic insurance company, establishment of an Institute of Islamic Understanding and creation of interest-free banking facilities in conventional commercial banks (p. 105).

He outlines four important characteristics of Islamization: (a) realizing the *tawhīdī* Islamic world-view which does not compartmentalize life into two water-tight realms; (b) restoring the central place of Islam as a comprehensive way of life; (c) desecularizing Malaysian culture, government, law, economy and education; and (d) correcting the concepts and implementation of national development policies.

Although several efforts at the Islamization of education have been made, the author cautions against the erosion of religious and moral values and ethics in professional education and against the effect of rapid development to achieve Vision 2020. Apprehension of what Peter Drucker has called "the schooled barbarians" among Malaysian professionals and corporate citizens the author describes the deterio-

rating condition of the family and youth in Malaysia with gripping statistics on divorce, juvenile delinquency, crimes, drug addiction, deviant sexual behaviour, and AIDS. The author's apprehension of Malaysian development to achieve Vision 2020 (which if not integrated in all aspects could mean the sacrifice of religious and moral values) remains the major theme of his book in subsequent chapters.

Chapter seven discusses the need for a social-cultural transformation of the new Malay in order to face the 21st century and to realize Vision 2020 so that the Malay community will not be left behind the other Malaysians. The author identifies major socio-cultural factors that hinder the progress of the Malays. He also discusses the causes of such factors, like the liberal-secularistic mind-set, conspicuous and ostentatious life styles, money politics syndrome, weak moral fibre syndrome, the slave-master and patron-client complex, the *lepak* (loafing or loitering) syndrome among the youth, the mediocrity syndrome, the dependency syndrome, the short-term gain propensity, the low regard for the value of time, excessive other-worldly orientation, superstitious mentality, *fitnah* (slander and defamation) syndrome, and deviationist cult syndrome. The author feels that the Malays themselves have to effect their own social-cultural transformation; because according to the Qur'ān, "Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their selves" (13: 11). These observations by the author are very important and should be heeded by the Malays for their own progress.

The author focuses on Vision 2020 and provides an insight into the Malay-Muslims' perspective in his concluding chapter. Vision 2020 is only a general outline of the future Malaysian nation. This Vision has been criticized by some Malay Muslims, especially from the opposition parties on the ground that it was "not based on a sound Islamic framework, and is devoid of the concern for the ultimate accountability to God." Others feel that it will "water down the special rights and privileges of the Malays, as Malaysia accelerates its industrialization process." However, many Malay Muslim intellectuals regard the Vision as compatible with Islam, and urge that Muslims should seize this opportunity for a legitimate share of the nations' economic development and modernization. They feel that Muslims must pursue science education, information technology, and economic development more vigorously, and also undergo intellectual and social-cultural transformation. The author emphasises at several places the need for spelling out a tenth vision to the proposed nine. This tenth vision is, "the need

to integrate moral-spiritual values in all dimensions of national development, such that they constitute a common unifying force which binds together all the national objectives into a complementary and harmonious whole” (p. 158). He argues that this vision is in conformity with the Islamic world-view which does not separate the ethico-religious dimension from life activities. It will prevent Vision 2020 from being compartmentalized into disparate perspectives and receiving contradictory interpretations based on the interpreters themselves. Even at the point of writing this work, the author argues that there are some groups which extol only the business or scientific dimension of the Vision rather than looking at it holistically.

The book contains many novel and thought-provoking ideas. For example, the author’s explanation of the resurgence of Islam in terms of the internal dynamism of Islam itself is something never brought to the fore by scholars of Islamization. His reflections on Islamization and its four important characteristics are also useful criteria. His identification of the social-cultural problems with Malay-Muslims, which act as barriers against meeting the challenges of the 21st century, is thought-provoking. He provides up-to-date statistics to clarify his observations on the rise of moral decadence among Muslim youth and family in chapter six. Finally, he highlights the need to add another significant item to the Vision 2020 proposed by Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (the Prime Minister of Malaysia) to ensure a comprehensive view of development that will not lose sight of moral and religious values.

However, the book has a few shortcomings. There are glaring typographic errors in every chapter which could have been avoided with thorough editing. Secondly, because of the nature of the book, which is a collection of papers presented on various occasions, repetition is perhaps inevitable. Undoubtedly, the arguments of the author are well-supported. However, the frequency of presenting a stream of quotations from authorities can distract the reader. It would have been more interesting if the author had drawn upon his own arguments in depth. The author does not claim any originality of thought. According to him, “from the point of view of originality of ideas, anyone familiar with writings on *da’wah* in the Malay language will immediately recognize that there is little that is truly novel in my analysis.” (p.74)

Despite these shortcomings, this work is a commendable effort which would help scholars on Malaysia and Malay-Muslims to gain an

understanding of the social phenomena in the country. The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia should also be applauded for publishing this work.

History and Historians

Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians, edited by Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher (New York: Ithaca Press, 1994). ISBN 0 86372 185 0

Reviewer: Othman Ali, Department of History, IIUM

In the preface, the editor spells out the purpose of the book in the following words: "I have often wanted an introduction to Middle Eastern historiography that would be lively... to this end I settled on the methods of oral history." (p.viii)

The study consists of interviews with eight leading historians, who have participated in, and to a large extent shaped, the major historiographical transitions of post-World War II era. The list includes Albert Hourani, Charles Issawi, Andre Raymon, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, Maxime Rodinson, Nikki Keddie, Halil Inalcik and Abdul Karim Rafeq. They were asked almost identical questions which were about each of the scholar's "formation" (family background), early interest in the Middle Eastern history, and their philosophy of history as it evolved over time. They were also asked to comment on the on-going debate about the nature of orientalism and the issues which were raised by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism*. Finally, the editor asked each of the scholar in this study about the impact of the School of Annales d' Histoire Economique et Sociale on their work.

The introduction of the editor is a very informative discussion on the modern Middle East historiography. Here the editor reviews the major trends which have emerged in post-World War I in the West in the field of orientalism with special emphasis on the School of Annales. The latter was a very prominent trend in historiography in the West in late 1920s. It was developed by a small group of scholars, mainly French, who were, "steeped in Weberian and Marxist political