

Book Review

Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism, by Farid Esack. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, ISBN 1851681213, Pp. 288.

Reviewer: Abdal-Hakim Murad, Secretary, The Muslim Academic Trust, London.

During the late 1980s, Farid Esack was one of the most conspicuous Muslim campaigners against apartheid in his native South Africa. His sermons and broadsides diffused by the "Call to Islam" Association of which he was national co-ordinator until 1990, were warmly received, particularly by anti-racist sections of the Christian churches. Among Muslims, however, he remained a provocative and sharply controversial figure. Most mosques and Islamic organisations saw him as a dangerous gadfly, either because they were nervous about his support for the ANC, which they believed might launch Ugandan-style expulsions of South Africa's Asians, or because they were disturbed by his apparent co-option by Sally Oak-type Christians.

This rejection by South African Muslims drove Esack further into the embrace of Christian activist movements, who welcomed him on their platforms. The book under review reveals the extent to which his ideas are coloured by his Christian association. Esack is here proposing an iconoclastic revolution in Islamic methodology, the result being a set of Islamic ethics that dovetail precisely with liberal values. No unsightly survivals from the past are to be permitted: the Qur'anic ethics is, despite all appearances, a miraculous prefiguration of late twentieth-century Western ideals. Esack follows the path taken by earlier modernists, such as Amir Ali, who a hundred years ago re-examined the Qur'ān to discover in its pages, the entire moral code of Victorian England.

Esack recognises that to defuse or bypass the apparently non-liberal and traditionalist thrust of Muslim scripture requires an elaborate new hermeneutics. Hence much of the book attempts a reappraisal of *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) and *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudence). One recognises traces of a post-modern strategy in a closer reading of the text, which

then unravels, to be sewn back together with meanings read in by the bold hermeneut.

Unfortunately, this book is marred by a number of embarrassing errors, some quite glaring. On page 95 a Ḥadīth describing all humanity as “the family of God” is justified by attributing it to the neo-Wahabi writer Nasir al-Albani's book *Silsilah al-ḥadīth al-ḍaʿīfah*, whose explicit intention is to list only Ḥadīths which are spuriously attributed to the Prophet (SAS). On p.112 the *bila kayf* (immodal) interpretation of the anthropomorphic passages in the Qurʾān is imputed to Ibn Hanbal (it is in fact a quintessentially Ashʿarī doctrine). On page 270 we are told that the Ashʿarīs “opposed rationalism and were supportive of notions of predestination,” whereas this is in reality a good definition of the Hanbalism which the Ashʿarīs opposed: rationalism is prominent in the standard Ashʿarī texts, as is their doctrine of Acquisition (*kasb*), which is a radical denial of Hanbalite /*Mujbira* notions of predestination. On page 276, a *tafsīr* work is attributed to Ibn ʿArabī, whereas scholarship has known for several decades that this text is in fact by Afif al-Dīn al-Tilmasānī. The use of dates is at times inconsistent and confusing: for instance, at the top of page 177, Shahrastānī's date of death is given as 1153, while at the bottom of the same page it becomes 548: the Gregorian and Hijra dates respectively, although the distinction is not indicated or explained, here or elsewhere.

The reader's confidence is further undermined when he learns of Esack's scepticism, *a la* Goldziher and Schacht, about the authenticity of the Ḥadīth literature. Thus he states that “where I do cite a Ḥadīth in support of a particular opinion, it is not because I believe that it is authentically the word of Muhammad, although that may indeed be the case; I cite a Ḥadīth because it reflects the presence of, and support for, the idea among earlier Muslims.” By this manoeuvre, most scriptural materials which obstruct Esack's theory of a liberal revelation is handily discarded. He does not, for instance, have to construct an exegesis to defuse such Ḥadīth as “Each Jew or Christian who hears of me, and then does not believe my message, shall be one of the inhabitants of the Fire.” Even Christian or secular readers of his text will note that this involves Esack in a contradiction when he turns to his leading task: the adumbration of a new Qurʾānic hermeneutic. This is because his radical deconstruction of the Qurʾān relies heavily on locating it within its original context. The Pakistani scholar Fazlur

Rahman suggested that the sacred text acquired its temporal colouring from its passage through the mind of the Prophet, and that the traditional situational exegesis (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) active upon each verse has a confining effect. The rules of the Qur'ān cannot regularly transcend the coordinates in time and space which they immediately addressed. A *ḥukm*, to use the language of the jurists, is not normative and cannot transcend the archetypal *'illah* or the *sabab*. And with the *ratio* of so many moral events today radically altered, Rahman and Esack demand that the content of the Qur'anic message must in many places be subject to suspension or fundamental re-evaluation. Hence Esack writes (p.12): "it is impossible to speak of an interpretation of the Qur'anic text applicable to the whole world." This opinion is hardly post-modern or even novel: it informed the jurisprudence of Najm al-Din al-Tufi and many Shī'ā *Ghulāt* in the middle ages, and is a recurrent modernist theme in this century. Mustafa al-Sibā'ī, for instance, used it to enable his vision of the Qur'ān as a kind of Marxist manifesto. But Esack, by querying the Ḥadīth literature, has in fact closed this option against himself. The contexts of Qur'anic revelation are mediated entirely by the Ḥadīth. Sīrah is merely a Ḥadīth genre—and not the least precarious one; and if there is no Sīrah, there is no *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

Esack's *tafsīr*, as he himself makes clear, is driven by praxis. It is not an abstract encounter with God and revelation that moves him to redefine the latter (and to some extent the former); it is his own turbulent experience of injustice in the world. He borrows from the liberation theology of Gutierrez and others to suggest that old-fashioned scriptural readings, which acquiesce in establishment tyranny, must be displaced by a liberative exegesis that emphasises God's justice. This is a curious proposal, particularly since many scholars have already seen liberation theology as amounting in effect to an Islamization of Christianity. Yet Esack would like us to inject the allegedly Christian paradigm of liberation into a static and accommodationist Islam, so as to render religion capable of changing structures, not just individual souls.

In his attempt to co-operate with Christian opponents of apartheid, Esack reinterprets Qur'ān and approves a doctrine which allows Christians and Jews, and others, to achieve salvation on their own terms. Thus, he argues that *īmān* and *kufr* do not denote "reified" faith and unbelief, but dispositions of the heart which can exist within any religious denomination. He, however, forgets to explain how to

interpret such verses like “They commit *kufr* who say, ‘God is Jesus, the son of Mary’.”

Esack's book also attempts to tackle another interesting issue. Accepting without discussion the liberal axiom that racism and “sexism” are analogous forms of oppression, he demands the abolition of gender-related dimensions of Qur'anic legislation which conflict with modern liberal values. In the early 1990s, Nelson Mandela had promised the mainstream Muslim organisations that Muslim personal law would be introduced following the abolition of apartheid, allowing South Africa's Muslim community the right to be judged by Sharī'ah values in matters of inheritance and marriage law. Esack, however, led a determined protest against this move. In May 1995 he appeared before the relevant government sub-committee, and pleaded with the authorities to change their mind. Partially due to this, in October 1996, the final version of the country's constitution made it clear that there would be no room for Sharī'ah justice in the new South African state. Esack, predictably, was delighted. Esack's campaign against the Sharī'ah is a manifestation of his apparent conviction that in every case where the ethos of the Qur'ān appears to conflict with that of modern liberalism, then it is the Qur'ān which must give way. Liberals who demand the abolition of Qur'anic guidance on inheritance, marriage, divorce, custodianship of minors, and indeed any other social issue, must be set in authority over the *ijmā'* of the Ummah, past and present.

This approach has provoked huge controversy in South Africa, particularly in connection with Esack's advocacy of female *imāms* in mosques. He cites with approval a remote Cape Province community where men and women take turns in leading the Friday prayers, and mocks the foolish “conservatives” who have the temerity to reject this. At this stage of the book Esack does not even go through the motions of claiming a Qur'anic justification for his views. Neither can he be troubled to discuss the minority of classical scholars, such as Ibn 'Arabī (again), who have validated the leadership of women for male or mixed congregations, or their *fiqh* justifications. This feminist issue recalls once again Esack's responsiveness to his Christian tutors, who have been anxious to direct Muslims along the lines recently followed by those liberal churches which ordain priestesses.

In sum, Esack's book is written entirely in Christian theological language. It completely lacks the style and reverent tenor of Muslim

reflection, with its characteristic indigenous terminology, and with the deployment of scriptures as sacred archetypes rather than as archaic problems. Christian missiology has long recognised the need to secure such a paradigm shift in Muslim discourse. Attempts to debate with Muslims on Muslim ground, using Muslim categories, have an unnervingly poor record of securing conversions. Modern missionary establishments, nowadays politely wrapped in the veil of “dialogue,” prefer to convert Muslims first to the use of Western Christian terminology and concerns, after which, it is thought, formal conversion will follow naturally. And in Esack's case, the success of this approach is very striking. Given his language, his moral code, his disdain for the “the letter” and preference for the “spirit” (however shallow), Esack has become closer to the New Testament than to the Qur’ān.

Max Weber and Islam, edited by Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999. ISBN 1560004002, Pp. 331.

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The book under review is the outcome of a conference that was held in 1984 to consider and analyze Weber's scattered comments on Islam in order to evaluate his theory of religion. It comprises eleven essays, which were presented in the conference by well-known scholars like Ira M. Lapidus, Peter Hardy, Barbara Metcalf, Francis Robinson, S.N. Eisenstadt and others. They elaborate, interpret and evaluate Weber's theses on religion and capitalism with particular reference to Islam. It is an important addition to comparative sociology of religion. Prior to this volume Bryan S. Turner published a book on the same topic which earned appreciation from the academic community.¹ Turner was critical of Weber's interpretation of Islam. He did not find Weber's analysis of Islamic ethics compatible with his analysis of socio-economic structure of Islamic society.² To him, Weber's argument about the warrior ethic of Islam is “not an argument about any idealist view of history, but it is, furthermore, not an analysis of elective affinity.”³

Max Weber is one of the foremost sociologists of the modern age. His main concern was to study the system of ideas in cross-cultural