

Book Review

Nurcholish Madjid (Editor) - Treasures of Islamic Intellectuals (2019, First published in 1988)

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Any discourse on contemporary Muslim Intellectualism or philosophy should begin with looking into the Hellenic influence, especially during the 2nd Islamic Century under the Abbasid Caliphate, particularly during the period of al-Makmun. Earlier, Christianity had begun to gather pace, especially from the works of Augustine. While it is true that it was only during the Middle Ages, such as in the 12th and 13th century that Europe began to open its doors for high theological and philosophical debates, especially through the contribution of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, today's Europe is different from the Middle East as far as material civilization is concerned.

What has brought “backwardness” in the Muslim World? Was it the result of the teachings of Islam itself, or rather the exploitation of imperial powers? Going beyond such questions of teachings and exploitation, Nurcholish Madjid brings readers to a rational discourse. He hypothesizes that the presence of countless Muslim philosophers in the Islamic world is proof that rationalism has also been part of the day-to-day life of educated Muslims in the Middle East as well as Andalusia in Western Islam.

Nurcholish Madjid, an Indonesian scholar, compiled great works by Muslim thinkers, beginning from as early as 2nd Century Islam through the works of Al-Kindi, al-Ashaari, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He further presented works of the next generation of Muslim thinkers such as al-

Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldun, before going on to al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, who are known to be modernist Muslim thinkers.

Before discussing each work, Nurcholish provides a long introduction, presenting the principles of Islam and how leaders after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) such as ‘Umar al-Khattab made “brave” decisions when it came to jurisprudence. ‘Umar is considered as the first to have practiced *Ijtihad* (interpretation), implying the importance of rationalism and how it has been practiced by the close *sahabah*. Centring on Sunni belief, the author provides a discussion on the different extremes in Islam such as the Khawarij (those believing in strict followings of its manifestation in form) and Murji’ah (those who focus on substance and care little about form) in one opposite extreme, and the other being those such as the Qadariyah (Free Will) and Jabariah (Predestinarian).

The philosophical dimension of the book begins with the presentation of one of Al-Kindi’s major work, *Fi wahdaniyat Allah wa tunahiy jism al-‘alam* (*On the Oneness of God and the Limitation of the Body of the World*). Al-Kindi tackled the actual and potential of things and how such concept, if carefully understood, could help Muslims to better understand the idea of God. Aristotle’s work obviously had some influence on Al-Kindi’s thought, especially on the idea of metaphysics. While it is true that Quranic teachings are still followed, Neoplatonism began to make its impact on the Islamic theological (Aqidah) debate, which had led to the development of Rationalism by the Mu’tazilites. Al-Kindi made the attempt to both Islamise and Arabicise the Greek’s debate on the metaphysical world. In the process, he also tried to explain Islam and God through syllogisms. His move in the philosophical world opened a door to Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism which was popularized by Plotinus had influenced not only the realms of theology and philosophy, but to a great extent, the world of Sufism, especially non-conventional *Tasawwuf* through the ideology of *The Emanation of Monism or Singularity*.

Immediately after discussing Al-Kindi’s idea, Nurcholish brings the readers’ attention to Abu Hassan Ali Bin Ismail al-Ashaari’s thoughts, popularly known as Ashaarism. Using rationalism, the latter rejected the foundational aspects of the Mu’tazilites’ rational thought of which

he was once a follower. He managed to defend the Islamic faith which he believed would be further corrupted by philosophical movements. However, Al-Ashaari's approach of rationalism was also challenged when he was accused of deviating from the tenets of Islam. Using samples of al-Ashaari's work, *Risalah fi istihsan al-khawd fi 'ilm al-kalam* (A Treatise on Appropriateness of Inquiry in 'Ilm al-Kalam), where he defended his school of thought, popularly known as 'Ilm al-Kalam, Nurcholish Madjid tries to show how Al-Ashaari was *true to Islam*. Readers might be eager to know the editor's (Nurcholish) own view on the thinkers' thoughts as compiled in this book. This aspect is lacking and could only be found in very few paragraphs for each thinker in their introduction. Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina's works also merit Nurcholish' attention. In general, he mentions how the concept of *Nubuwwah*, at least at a philosophical level was defended by al-Farabi when he responded to Plato's concept of "Philosopher King" with "Prophet King". Al-Farabi benefited a lot from translation projects funded by the Abbasid caliphate and the contribution of Christian scholars such as Hunayn Ibn Ishak and his son, Ishak Ibn Hunayn, as well as Yahya Ibn Matta. Al-Farabi's work on "*Ihsha' al-'Ulum*" (Enumeration of the Sciences) which was selected by Nurcholish Madjid in his book, opened the door for European and Western people at large to the point that he was known as 'the fine flower'. His works were quoted by Muslim and other scholars such as Maimonides. Al-Farabi's work which was compiled by Nurcholish is about the level of knowledge on Allah, politics and the categories and purposes of theologians (*Mutakallim*).

Next, Nurcholish Madjid focuses Ibn Sina's work, *Risalah Fi Ithbat al-Nubuwwat* (*Treatise on Proof of Prophetic Inspiration*). In his work, Ibn Sina highlighted the prophets' knowledge, the Revelation and the universal intellect of the philosophers, which he believed may have the power to discover the truth, parallel to the prophets' knowledge. Ibn Sina further developed the knowledge on logic (*'Ilm al-Mantik*) which was popularized by Aristotle. It should be noted that while a majority of traditional Muslims believe that the metaphysical world (unseen world/ *'Ilm al-Ghayb*) is inconceivable to the human mind, philosophers such as Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, al-Kindi and to a certain extent, al-Ashaari, believed that the domain of *'Ilm al-Ghayb* should and must be explored for those capable of exploring them. Muslim philosophers

use the term active intellect as a tool of accessibility in answering the question of conceivability of the human mind on 'Ilm al-Ghayb, which became the central pillar dividing the so-called traditional Muslims and philosophical Muslims. This divide continues until today.

Nurcholish also mentions the significance of Greek literature in the Islamic World, especially Aristotle's writing. However, the discussion on how such works have been criticized among jurists and the Hanbali school was not neglected. Some of the criticisms were on the value of the Quran, questioning how Greek works were used to guide human beings to the truth. Al-Ghazali appears to have found the balance between the two traditions; Quranic and Hellenic. Al-Ghazali, as portrayed by Nurcholish, developed a heterodox view of Islam, believing that every dimension of human conceivability should go in line with Muslim Intellectualism, as the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith must not be compromised. Al-Ghazali believed in the power of intuition over active intellect to connect to other worlds. Al-Ghazali's work, *Fayasl al-tafriqa* (The Criterium of Distinction) was selected for readers' attention. In this work, he conceptualised five different meanings of existence, in which the failure to understand it may create a huge debate on what is the truth and even invite the problem of accusing others as infidel.

Al-Ghazali's work did not stop rationalism to flourish, as Ibn Rushd went on to underline the concept of double truth, arguing that both methods (divine revelation and active intellect) could bring man to the same truth. Nurcholish selected Ibn Rusyd's *Fasl al-Maqal fi ma bayn al-Hikma wa al-Shariah min Ittisal* (On the Harmony of Religions and Philosophy) as reference. It discusses three hierarchies of the path of truth; demonstrative, dialectic and rhetoric. He believes that both philosophy and/or jurisprudence can lead us to the truth. It appears that it was through Ibn Taymiyyah that the synthesis of Quranic and Hellenic thought was further developed after al-Ghazali. Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd believed that through active intellect, the human being could access the metaphysical world. However, Ibn Taymiyyah stressed on the importance of the Qur'an and Hadith. Nurcholish Madjid says that if it is lovable through the privilege of *Qashaf* (Spiritual Experience), the unseen world is accessible, not through rationality. As described in Ibn Taymiyyah's work, *Ma'arij al-Wushu'* (Stairs of Reaching), the belief on the power of rationality has gone too far, thinking that Greek

thinkers such as Aristotle had explained everything about reality. He wants Muslims to stick to the authenticity of Islam as expressed in the Qur'an and Hadith. We have seen so far that the pendulum of rationality in the Islamic world had swung from Hanbali's and the jurisprudence group to the Mu'tazillites, to Ashaarism and then to another direction with al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. The same pattern can be seen with Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rusyd, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Khaldun.

Ibn Khaldun's *On Knowledge and Its Various Types, On Teaching and Its Methods and Aspects, and on the Various Things Associated to Them*, is later presented by Nurcholish in the book. In his work, Ibn Khaldun emphasised on the importance of knowledge. In fact, he considered knowledge had to be shared on a grand scale, just like industries. This applies to all kinds of knowledge, both religious and secular. Generally, Ibn Khaldun too did not open doors for human rationality, unlike al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rusyd. However, his method of interpreting history has created a debate, as he seems to reject stories which cannot be logically proven. It seems that rationalism has died out at least in the Sunni world, while Iranian philosophers such as Mulla Sadra began producing works that developed a new trajectory of philosophy in Islam. Hence, Nurcholish works on reviving the discussions on modern Muslim thinkers, selecting works of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Both al-Afghani's *Ummah of The Past and Present, and The Remedy for its Diseases* and Muhammad Abduh's *Muqaddimah: Risalat al-Tauhid (Introduction: The Theology of Unity)*, provided a good discussion and medium for the Muslim ummah to look at the strength of their religion. However, it appears that both works did not capture the element of modernism which was known to have been produced by them and was often controversial. Perhaps, the works were the product of their different age of intellectuality. In his work, al-Afghani emphasised the importance of holding on to faith, and Muhammad Abduh tackled the concept of tawheed, following the previous method of theologians (dialectic) and the importance to understand the practices of early Muslims.

Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh's works that hint to favour the West sparked huge debates. Therefore, Nurcholish brought in the thoughts of Hamid Algar and Maryam Jameelah, critics of Muslim modernist groups, especially followers of al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Both Algar and Jameelah were Muslim converts

that emphasised the Quranic practice to be applied in all spheres of life. Whatever the case, the 10 works of Muslim thinkers compiled and discussed by Nurcholish in his introduction prove that rationalism has always been at the centre of traditional Muslim teachings.

What had brought the Muslim world to “backwardness”? Nurcholish argued that it was not the question of rationalism, but rather lack of technological capabilities that had brought the Muslim World to a vicious cycle of “backwardness”. The industrial revolution proved that Muslim societies were unable to compete against the growing powers of Western Europe, both economically and militarily. It is true as stated by Nurcholish that the Sumerian society that had once lived on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers contributed towards better agricultural technology in irrigation and ploughing systems, benefitting the Muslim world. But how could irrigation and ploughing compete with steam engines and machines in industrially dense societies? One wonders why there was no technological progress between Mesopotamian civilisation and the Industrial revolution, a question which was not answered by the author.

Treasures of Islamic Intellectuals is an interesting book that highlights the importance of rationality while reminding readers to return to the roots of Islam; the Qur’an and Hadith. Muslim thinkers should learn from the industrial problem which had led to the rise of Western power and the gradual demise of the caliphate system in the Islamic World. This book should be read to appreciate the highly praised rationalism in the Muslim World.