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Review Essay

SAMUEL JOHNSON'S THOUGHTS ABOUT ISLAM

*Hüseyin Çaksen*¹

Introduction

This review essay is about a late nineteenth-century book on Islam written by an American Orientalist Samuel Johnson (1822-1882). Johnson was a clergyman, a consecrated minister, a scholar of large attainments, an author, and by nature a poet. More especially, he was a student and interpreter of the Far Eastern religions. Whatever his work, he brought into it an open, cultivated, and philosophic mind.² The most enduring monument to Johnson's labour is his scholarly and philosophical study of the Oriental Religions: *India* (1872); *China* (1877); and *Persia* (1885). This study engaged him during his whole ministry and to the end of his life.

The *Persia*, nearly complete at his death, was edited by his friend, O. B. Frothingham, who also contributed a valuable preface. The motive to this study, as he says, was neither theological nor controversial, but to show through the ethical and spiritual import of the older civilizations the unity of human experience and to do justice to the spiritual nature common to humanity that speaks in differing faiths.³

This review essay is a revisit of this *Persia* book, which was published under the long title *Oriental Religions and Their Relation*

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² Samuel Johnson (clergyman), From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia [Internet]. 2021. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson_\(clergyman\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson_(clergyman)), last access January 2022.

³ Samuel B. Stewart, Johnson, Samuel (1822-1882). Harvard Square Library [Internet]. 2021. Available at: <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/samuel-johnson>, last access January 2022.

to *Universal Religion with an introduction by O. B. Frothingham (Persia)*.⁴ The book includes five sections as follows: (1) Advent of the religion of personal will: Its elements; (2) Development; (3) Political forces; (4) Philosophies; and (5) Islam. The section on Islam comprises two titles of “Mahomet” and “The Shah-Nameh or Book of Kings.” This essay presents Johnson’s thoughts about Islam with quotes from the book to emphasise what he perceived as the beauties that Islam brought to humanity.

Based on the Islamic teaching, it is worship that expands the soul of man. It is worship that develops the talents of men. It is worship that distinguishes and clears their inclinations. It is worship that fulfils desires. It is worship that expands and regulates their ideas. Worship is what limits the feelings of lust and anger. It is worship that removes the natural rusts that pollute the external and internal organs and emotions. It is worship that raises a person to his destined perfection. The highest and most sublime devotion between the servant (*‘abd*) and the lord (*ma’bud*) is worship. Yet, the highest of human perfection is this commitment and relationship.⁵

Johnson describes the importance and effects of worship on people and societies in Islam in these terms:

“What made Islam was the law that the worship of persons shall press irresistibly towards the worship of One Person; and that revelation by a direct messenger, which is the proper exponent of that sovereignty, shall tend to clothe itself with increasing definiteness and exclusiveness of sway. It must show, in proof of its authenticity, the power to bring both soul and body, every faculty and function of man, under its positive decrees. Mahomet understood the logical necessities of his position, when he announced that a completer legislation than that of Abraham, Moses, or Christ had come to reorganize the world.⁶ His (Mahomet's)

⁴ Fortunately, online version of the book is available from the following link free of charge <https://archive.org/details/orientalreligion00johnuoft/page/n8/mode/1up>

⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Bakara Süresi 21-22. âyetlerin tefsiri. In: *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı. İsharatül-İ'caz (in Ottoman Turkish) [Internet]*. Mart 1, 2012. Available at: <http://www.erisale.com/#content.tr.6.196>, last access January 2022.

prophetic cry and conquering sword were not the mere outbreak of an Arab fanatic, leading his desert hordes to raid on the civilized world. An instinct so powerful for seven centuries of civilization that it had deepened with every outward contradiction and defeat, had but come at last to speak with a clearness that could neither be ignored nor misunderstood.”⁶

Idolatry refers to the worship of various figures symbolizing divine beings in polytheistic religions. The Quran describes idolatry as shirk and those who associate partners with Allah as polytheists. Shirk is the biggest sin that Allah will never forgive. Allah brought the principle of belief (*tawhīd*) in Him, who is one, through His prophets. All the prophets told their people that there is no god to be worshiped but Allah, and that they are also the messengers of Allah. Those who accepted the invitation of the prophets did not leave the line of *tawhīd*, those who did not respond to the invitation or those who took their prophets to different positions from where they were and gave them other functions could not protect *tawhīd*, so they went astray.⁷ As Johnson emphasized below, there are many verses in the Quran that command belief in one Allah and prohibit idolatry. He also summarized the belief in Allah in Christianity and Judaism and idolatry as follows:

“Verily Jesus is as Adam in the sight of God. He created him of the dust, and said ‘Be,’ and he was” (Quran, 3:59). “Forbear to say Three; it will be better for you. Believe in God and His apostles. He is all in heaven and earth, and He is a sufficient helper” (Quran, 4:171). “He doth not command you to take the angels or the prophets as your masters. It beseemeth not a man and a prophet that he should say to his followers, ‘Be ye worshippers of me’” (Quran, 3: 79-80). “God will not forgive the joining of other gods to Him. Yet they call upon

⁶ Johnson, *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion*, 530.

⁷ Ahmet Güç, Putperestlik. In: *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi. TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi (in Turkish) [Internet]*. 2007. Available at: <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/putperestlik>, last access January 2022.

goddesses, they invoke a rebel Satan” (Quran, 4:116-117). All semi-deities in human shape, for centuries multiplying their names and claims; all double or triple manifestations of godhead; all organically inspired classes, — were but delusions of idolatry, without a shadow of right to hoard or to distribute the truth of God. He, and He only, speaks to all, to prophet and slave alike; nor is one, more than another, lifted above his human defects and needs by any divine message he is chosen to convey. This at least was the theory of Islam in its beginning; and the age so understood it, and hailed the new call to freedom. To the Jew, Mahomet allowed his theocratic idea, but purged away its nationalism, its priestly traditions, and perversions. He left the Christian his God and Christ, but smote off the three heads of his Trinity, and reduced the Only Begotten to a member of the line of prophets.⁸

The Possessor and Master of the universe surely does everything with knowledge, disposes every affair with wisdom, directs everything all-seeingly, treats everything all-knowingly, and arranges everything willing the instances of wisdom, purposes, and benefits that are apparent in them. Since, then, the One who creates knows, surely the One who knows will speak. Since He will speak, surely He will speak to those who possess consciousness and thought, and those who will understand His speech. Since He will speak to those who possess thought, surely he will speak to mankind, whose nature and awareness are the most comprehensive of all conscious beings. Since He will speak to mankind, surely He will speak to the most perfect of mankind and those most worthy of address. Since He will speak to those who are most perfect, most worthy of address, highest in morality, and who will guide humanity; He will certainly speak to Muḥammad (ﷺ), who, as friend and foe alike testify, is of the highest disposition and morality, who is obeyed by one fifth of humanity, to whose spiritual rule half of the globe has submitted, with the radiance of whose light the future of mankind has been

⁸ Johnson, 554-555.

illumined for thirteen centuries, to whom the believers, the luminous segment of humanity, renew five times daily the oath of allegiance, for whose happiness they pray, for whom they call down Allah's blessings and bear admiration and love in their hearts. Certainly, He will speak to Muḥammad (ﷺ) and indeed He has done; He will make him the Prophet, and indeed He has done; He will make him the guide for the rest of humanity, and indeed He has done.⁹

Johnson described the assignment of prophethood duty to Muḥammad (ﷺ) with using literary and expressive sentences in the following paragraphs:

It could not have been accidental that the one supreme force of the epoch issued from the solitudes of that vast peninsula round which the tides of empire rose and fell. Every exclusive prophetic claim in the name of a sovereign Will has been a cry from the desert. The symbolic meaning given to Arabia by the withdrawal of the Christian apostle to commune with a Power above flesh and blood, in Mahomet became more than a symbol. Arabia was itself the man of the hour, the Prophet of Islam its concentrated word. To the child of her exalted traditions, driven by secret compulsion out into the lonely places of the starry night, his mouth in the dust, the desert spoke without reserve.¹⁰ Here and there Mahomet is reminded of the mirage as a symbol of sin, or of the sudden burst of fertility out of parched barrenness after a rain. But he is too much in earnest to dwell on natural imagery. "It does not beseem me to be a poet." Symbols have done their work in rousing his self-consciousness to the intensities of duty, to hope and fear, and awful command. They are transmuted into personality, — hidden fuel of his absolutism as Prophet of the Will they have made known. Identity of subject

⁹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, "The nineteenth letter, The miracles of Muhammad (PBUH), The first sign," in *From the Risale-i Nur Collection. The Letters [Internet]*. March 1, 2012. Available at: http://www.erasale.com/index.jsp?locale=en#content_en.202.114, last access January 2022.

¹⁰ Johnson,, 561-562.

and object is here completed and instructive.¹¹ There he (Mahomet) stands before an unlettered race, whose native genius for poetry despised all written records, to cry: “Bountiful is God, who has taught man the use of the pen;” and therewith to give forth, written on bladebones, bits of parchment, palm-leaves, and on the tablets of the heart of hearers, in impure Arabic and without constructive method, out of the emergencies of inward and outward struggles, the Book (*Kur’an*, somewhat to be read) which should be the fountain of faith, letters, and institutions to hundreds of millions of men for fifty generations.¹² Not only is the supernatural power of the Prophet in full play thus early, even to the sacredness of his person from attacks, and the homage of nature to his presence, but the adoration of him has gone so far that his common replies are quoted as the words of Allah, not as his own; and his whole speech and conduct from birth to death, as well as his Koran, are evidently regarded as divine.¹³

Since the Quran has come from the Sublime Throne and the Greatest Name, and from the highest degree of each Name, it is Allah’s Word in regard to His being Sustainer of All The Worlds; it is a Divine decree through His title of Allah of All Beings; it is an address in the name of the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth; it is a conversation in respect of absolute dominicality; it is a pre-eternal discourse on account of universal Divine sovereignty; it is a notebook of the favours of the Most Merciful from the point of view of all-embracing, all-encompassing Divine mercy; it is a collection of addresses at the start of which are certain ciphers in respect of the tremendousness of Divine majesty; and through its descent from the comprehensiveness of the Greatest Name, it is a holy scripture full of

¹¹ Ibid, 564-565.

¹² Ibid, 583-584.

¹³ Ibid, 613.

wisdom which looks to and inspects all sides of the Sublime Throne.¹⁴

Johnson explained in the following paragraph that the Quran is a miracle book:

Yet in all this the marvellous Arabic tongue went through a transformation that consigned all Mo'allakats, Kassidets, or other literary treasures to comparative oblivion, — no continuation of their styles even, but a new creation. What triumphant mastery so to transform a nation's jealously guarded ideal, mingling native with foreign words! For language was the Arab's religion more than all the gods of the Kaaba; yet the Koran, the Koran only, is henceforth the norm of books to this book-adoring Arab, the veritable Arabic speech of Allah, the tracing of the infinite pen!¹⁵ “See you not that I, an ignorant prophet, could never have done this thing, — lifted your organ for the love-songs of Imriol-Kais, or the Hamfite Rolls of Abraham, into a holy tongue for all mankind? Ask you greater miracle than this, O unbelieving people, than to have your profane Arabic turned into a message of universal mercy, a thunderbolt against tyranny, a trumpet to call the world to singleness of heart and faith? Do they bid thee change it? Say, it is not for me to change it by my own will. Verily, I fear if I rebel, the punishment of the great day.”¹⁶ If it (Koran) is not poetry, — and it is hard to say whether it be or not, — it is more than poetry. It is not history, nor biography. It is not anthology, like the Sermon on the Mount; nor metaphysical dialectics, like the Buddhist Sutras; nor sublime homiletics, like Plato's conferences of the wise and foolish teachers. It is a prophet's cry, Semitic to the core; yet of a meaning so universal and so timely that all

¹⁴ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, “The twenty-fifth word, introduction” in *From the Risale-i Nur Collection. The Words*. Available at: <http://www.erisale.com/index.jsp?locale=en#content.en.201.377>, last access January 2022.

¹⁵ Johnson, 584-585.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 585.

the voices of the age take it up, willing or unwilling, and it echoes over palaces and deserts, over cities and empires, first kindling its chosen hearts to world-conquest, then gathering itself up into a reconstructive force that all the creative light of Greece and Asia might penetrate the heavy gloom of Christian Europe, when Christianity was but the Queen of Night.¹⁷ He (Mahomet) allowed miraculous gifts to the earlier prophets, though not as a mark of superiority, since the Koran was above all miracles, the very speech of God. He firmly maintained the separation of the human from the divine by an immeasurable gulf, which it was blasphemy to deny or ignore.¹⁸

In one place in the Gospels, Jesus (upon whom be peace) says: “I am going so that the Lord of the World may come” (Halabi, Sira, i, 214; John, 16:7). Who other than the Noble Messenger (upon whom be blessings and peace) has come after Jesus who will be the Ruler of of the World, distinguish and separate truth from falsehood, and guide mankind in place of Jesus? That is to say, Jesus (upon whom be peace) was constantly giving his community the good news: “Another will come; no need will remain for me. I am his forerunner and herald.”¹⁹

In the following paragraphs Johnson emphasized that Islam is the supreme religion when compared to other religions:

Fate, in the Mussulman mind, as the Koran itself fully shows, is as far as possible from sup pressing the spontaneity of instinct or will. No Scriptures are more intensely moral, no history more replete with heroism, personal independence, enthusiastic zeal, than those of Islam. For the sense of necessity has, besides the

¹⁷ Ibid, 586.

¹⁸ Ibid, 623.

¹⁹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, “The nineteenth letter, The miracles of Muhammad (PBUH), The sixteenth sign,” in *From the Risale-i Nur Collection. The Letters [Internet]*. March 1, 2012. Available at: <http://www.erisale.com/index.jsp?locale=en#content.en.202.208>, last access January 2022.

outward, also an inward side; it attaches not to the edicts of a Divine Will alone, but to the moral impulses and convictions, the patriotic and humane instincts.²⁰ Necessarian freedom, if not in its scientific yet in its moral forms, has certainly proved a mighty counter action for Islam to the predestinating Will in which the personal worship of Allah has been most strongly entrenched. It is a foregleam of the religion of inviolable law.²¹ No religion, not even Christianity, has equalled Islam in the extent to which it has been stretched and strained by the push of free-thought from within its name and professed communion. Great princes in every line and land have continually sought to crown their conquests and glory by uniting sects and faiths upon liberal thought. And even where the impulse has pressed through all bounds to a point so far distant as the higher pantheism of the Sufis is from the definite externality of the Koranic Allah, — the name of Islam has seldom been either dropped or refused. Internal persecution has, as we have seen, been not so much in the name of Islam or its Prophet as from personal political, dialectic, or interpretative considerations.²²

Lastly, Johnson noted the followings about Islam:

The finest thing about this religion is the expansiveness of its name. It is not labelled for any individual, it is not called from Mahomet, as Christianity from Christ; it is *Islam*, or *Obedience*. Its unity of God is not marred by duality or trinity of persons, each with his own absolute claim; and for this very reason the multiplicity of incarnations, which we have already noted as resulting from the worship of personal Will, can stand side by side under its common name, with equal recognition as

²⁰ Johnson, 632-633.

²¹ Ibid, 633.

²² Ibid, 684-685.

portions of Islam, however unorthodox or mutually repugnant.²³

²³ Ibid, 685.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final

² – at in construct state

³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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