

BOOK REVIEW

THE VISION OF ISLAM*

Sachiko Murata and William Chittick

Until fairly recently - say ten or fifteen years ago -- there was a singular lack of books likely to attract Westerners to Islam or, for that matter, to answer the questions posed by young Muslims born in the West and anxious to deepen their faith. There were, of course, the academic works of the orientalists and there were books written by Muslims explaining what the good Muslim should and should not do. Both had and still have their uses, but neither was calculated to arouse passionate interest in the spiritual dimensions of the Faith.

Fortunately this is no longer the case. One thinks at once of the books of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, of du Pasquier's *Unveiling Islam* and the late Victor Danner's *The Islamic Tradition*. Now there is a further addition to the short list of what might be described, in this context, as highly recommendable books. It is the most comprehensive of them all. If one were to ask the simple question, "What have the authors left out?", the answer can only be: "Nothing that matters". William Chittick and Sachiko Murata (*whose Tao of Islam* was recently reviewed in *The Islamic Quarterly*) are amongst the most distinguished Islamic scholars working in the United States. As it happens they are also husband and wife. It can fairly be said that they lend real eminence to the State University of New York in this field, not only through their scholarship but also through a deep understanding of the Islamic Faith which is rare among academics in any country.

The Vision of Islam is the authors' response to a particularly severe challenge. The book grew out of an introductory course on Islam that one or

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other of them has taught at least once a year since 1983 in the Programme in Religious Studies at the Stony Brook campus of the State University of New York. Their audiences have been mixed; typically one third young born Muslims and the remainder non-Muslims who have often enrolled on this course in the mistaken belief that it would demand little of them. The authors were obliged to ask themselves how it was possible "to explain Islam both to Muslims, who - as a general rule - know nothing about their own religion but are defensive, and to Westerners, who also know nothing, but are instinctively hostile?" It is in overcoming this almost insuperable problem that they have produced a work of such importance both to Muslims more or less ignorant of their own Faith - a Faith from which many in the U.S. have been drifting away - and to Westerners totally ignorant of the spiritual dimensions of a religion they have been taught to regard with angry suspicion.

Making use of traditional texts, the authors have wisely turned their backs on the pathetic ideology of certain contemporary Muslim "scholars" who readily discard their intellectual heritage, claiming that this rich heritage is superfluous and that the Qur'an suffices, however superficially they may have understood it; "such people have surrendered to the spirit of the times. Those who ignore the interpretations of the past are forced to interpret their text in the light of the prevailing world-view... This is a far different enterprise than that pursued by the great authorities, who interpreted their present in the light of a grand tradition and who never fell prey to the up-to-date - that most obsolescent of all abstractions".

The authors offer four basic meanings for the word *Islam*, moving from the broadest to the narrowest. First, it indicates the submission of the whole of creation to its Creator. Secondly, the submission of human beings to the guidance of God as revealed through a succession of prophets. Thirdly, submission through the specific guidance of Muhammad, and finally the submission of the followers of Muhammad to God's practical instructions. They add that, in the first two cases, the word *islam* needs to be written without the capital letter. This distinction is important. The Prophet and Patriarch Abraham was one who submitted himself totally to his Creator. Clearly he was *muslim* but, equally clearly he was not "a Muslim" as the term is commonly understood.

The book is divided into four parts: "Islam", "Iman", "Ihsan" and, the fourth, "Islam in History". The authors point out that the ideal Islamic life has always been "organic" rather than "mechanical", and that the best way to get a feeling for this is to look at the physical structure of a traditional Islamic city; an example of "luxuriant jungle growth". The modern ideal is that of the "grid", a "rational" order imposed from outside, and - in many parts of the Muslim world today - secularising governments have imposed this grid on the old cities. "One of the aims has been, of course, to destroy the traditional social structure so that it can be re-made in the image of the

industrialised West". This excessive stress upon a specific kind of modern rationality, they add, "is simply aiding in the dissolution of Islamic values and the Islamic world-view".

At the beginning of the section on "Iman" the authors draw attention to the fundamental difference between faith and belief, a point dealt with at length by Cantwell Smith in his book on the subject. For convenience we refer to a pious Muslim as a "believer", but in common speech, when someone says "I believe such-and such", this is not a declaration of faith but a statement of opinion. In Islam the word has no connotation of doubt or uncertainty. "*Iman* involves confidence in a truth that is really true, not a supposed truth". The Prophet himself defined this term when he said: "Faith is a knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs"; it involves knowing, speaking and doing.

A phrase heard many times each day on the lips of Muslims is *al-hamdu lillah*. Chittick and Murata emphasise that this is not really equivalent to the English sentence "Praise be to God!", which may be uttered on some special occasion. "Rather, it is a simple statement of fact. No one else deserves praise, because no one else is the source of good and benefit. Everything positive and praiseworthy comes from God, even if talent or the weather or luck seem to be the immediate causes". Hence, they add, "the sheer ugliness of ingratitude, for this is to shut ones eyes to the obvious".

A further common error, they point out, is the equating of modern science with "Knowledge" in the Islamic sense of the word. "The fundamental difference between the traditional Islamic approach to the natural world and that of modern science is that Muslims begin with the faith that "There is no god but God". In other words, Muslims already know that the "signs" are signs of God, but they are trying to understand what God is saying. The scientists feel that understanding natural phenomena has nothing to do with whether or not there is a God. "The result is two radically different points of view that cannot easily be brought together". The Muslim, moreover, accepts the fact that we are basically ignorant and that there are uncounted mysteries that can never be solved by human reason. At the same time, ignorance "is to some degree curable; the way to reach the remedy is to listen to the words of the prophets. More specifically, it is to accept that the Qur'an is the speech of God, full of the signs of God." This, rather than fallible observation and faulty theorising, is the key to true knowledge.

The traditional Islamic approach starts necessarily with the concept of *Tawhid* and therefore moves from what is above to what is below, the process followed by modern science being the exact opposite. The Muslim starts, as the authors explain, from the principle of *Tawhid* and attempts to situate everything else in relation to this principle. "The meaning of a thing is found in its sign-ificance. The thing is a sign, and the sign speaks of God". At least in modern Christianity there has been a sharp distinction

made between knowledge and faith. In Islam these two effectively coincide. As the authors say, people can only have "sure knowledge" if they possess an absolute point of reference: this is the oneness of God and the unicity of His creation. "*Tawhid* in its turn brings about a commitment known as faith. Once again, we are brought back to the coincidence of knowledge and faith".

The problem for monotheists has always been to account for the opposites in relation to the One. Chittick and Murata are illuminating on this subject. Their point of reference is necessarily the distinction between the Names of Majesty and the Names of Mercy, as they are enumerated in the Qur'an. In this context they deal at some length with the contrast between God's "distance" and His "nearness". "It is difficult", they say, "to overestimate the importance of these two categories of Names for Muslim thinkers about *Tawhid*". On account of the two different perspectives which these Names allow, Muslim discussion of God's relationship with the world and its inhabitants gravitates in what may at first appear a confusing way between the standpoint which considers God as distant and severe, and the other which sees Him as near and kind.

Qur'an and Ḥadīth, as they point out, normally discuss nearness and distance in terms of their human consequences. "To be distant from God is to be controlled by the attributes of Majesty and Wrath, and this can be a painful situation. To be near is to be controlled by the attributes of Beauty and Mercy, and this is a pleasant place to be". The Qur'an essentially associates hell with distance and paradise with nearness, always bearing in mind that Beauty and Mercy are ultimately "more real" than Majesty and Wrath because closeness to God is closeness to Reality. Wrath, they add, will eventually disappear since it pertains to things that are isolated from their divine Source, and nothing can be isolated from God in a real and definitive sense.

The authors go on to discuss the important point that human beings "recognise *Tawhid* innately". Because of the "Covenant of *Alast*", people come into this world acknowledging the truth. As a famous Ḥadīth points out, their upbringing and environment distort their original disposition and, instead of serving God alone, they associate other realities with Him. The authors are not afraid to discuss some of the most difficult problems facing the Muslim thinker, including the idea of divine "misguidance". To understand this, they say, we must put aside the usual tendency to judge God by our own standards of right and wrong (standards that are usually defined in relation to the spirit of the times). We seek to understand such matters, but always in the knowledge of our own limitations. They proceed to discuss this question in terms of the "two hands" with which God created Adam - the hands of Mercy and of Wrath, or *tashbih* and *tanzih*. "To ask why God allows people to suffer is the same as asking why He allows them to be far from Himself". To be far from Him is to lack the divine attributes such as

unity, realness, wholeness, goodness and luminosity. Anyone who lacks these qualities is overcome by multiplicity, dispersion, imbalance, unreality and darkness. This leads to the question of Divine Judgement, and to say that God judges "is another way of saying that things sort themselves out; things show themselves for what they are".

Finally, in the section on History and Politics, the authors point out that it is commonly said that Islam does not exclude government from the realm of the sacred. This is true enough, since Islam does not exclude anything under the sun from the realm of the sacred. But whether the governments of Muslim countries have any claim to this divine sanction - this "mandate of heaven", as the Chinese would say - is quite another matter. The question must be asked whether either these governments or those who oppose them under the badge of what is often called "fundamentalism" are ever seen to be active in "doing what is beautiful" (the term the authors employ in relation to the concept of *ihsan*). They are critical also of "reformist Islam" which, they say, appeals to those dimensions of Islamic teachings that can be harmonised - or it is thought can be harmonised - with modern science and technology; hence the emphasis upon rationality and the devaluation of imagination.

This book is not only comprehensive over the whole spectrum of the Islamic reality; it is also rich in allusions and insights which often illuminate this reality from unexpected angles. As such it must have a powerful attraction not only for the Muslim who seeks a fuller understanding of his Faith, but also for the non-Muslim who seeks an authentic statement of what it means to be an adherent of the religion of *Tawhid*.

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