Book Reviews

Akbar S. Ahmed. *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society.* London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988. x + 215pp. £ 25.00 (Hardback).

This book is a personalized search by the author for a reconciliation between the "Islamic ideal" and the vast variety of ethnically, economically, politically and socially diverse muslim societies the world over. The research is conducted with reference to "six socio-historical categories", which constitute for the author "a theory of Islamic History". These are:

1. the time of the Prophet and the ideal caliphs (i.e., the first four caliphs called Rashidun);
2. the Arab dynasties (meaning the Umayyads and the Abbasids);
3. the three muslim empires (or the Ottomans, the Saffavids and the Mughals);
4. Islam of the periphery (referring to societies in which muslims are in minority, namely, the USSR, China, Southeast Asia and South of the Sahara in Africa);
5. Islam under European rule (i.e., under the impact of colonization by England, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Italy on "muslim society"); and
6. contemporary Islam. (p. 33).

Of the two parts the book is divided into, Part One, entitled "The Pattern of Islamic History", elaborates upon the first five of the categories listed above and, furthermore, contains a chapter on sufi saints besides two scholars of Islam, namely, Al Beruni and Ibn Khaldun. Part Two, entitled "Contemporary Muslim Society", deals with the last category. It discusses social consequences of the sudden enrichment of Saudi Arabia; the deprivation of the muslims of Hyderabad; encounters between muslim South Asian migrant labourers and the host-and-patron Arab employers of the United Arab Emirates; the status of and problems related to muslim women; Afghan refugees; and the "deplorable" state of muslim education and social sciences. Under the last-named topic is advocated the case of Islamic anthropology,

as a corollary to the endeavour by some economists to develop an Islamic economic order, and as a result of his scepticism towards the claims of Western social theorists to being neutral and fair in their analyses of muslim societies. In addition, there is a chapter on the USA as seen through muslim eyes, the values held "universally . . . . by human beings, regardless of religion, race, or caste" (p. 217), and the problems facing the modern world. The chapter concludes with a formula for the renewal of the "Islamic ideal" in the light of the "revolutionary Islamic charter", as understood by the author.

The gamut of topics listed above (and dealt with in 231 pages, minus the last 20 pages given to the appendices which have been used as a basis for analyzing all muslim societies and problems considered exclusive to muslims) should indicate an ambitious undertaking by Akbar Ahmed. Yet, his acknowledgement of a South Asian bias (i.e., his legitimizing the right to comment on all muslim societies – given his experience as a South Asian muslim, and on the grounds that the Subcontinent houses 40 percent of the total muslim population, has a geographical advantage in being located between the Middle East, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, and has produced "some of the most renowned and influential muslim thinkers of the twentieth century" (p. 5), namely, Iqbal, Azad, Mawdoodi, Faiz and Salman Rushdie) does not enhance the representativeness of his examples. Statistics cannot minimize the importance of in-depth studies of smaller societies in their own right, and the contribution these can make to our understanding of human societies. The sentiment that motivated the author to write this book was a concern for the "images of Islam prevalent in the [modern] world", the plight of contemporary muslim societies, and his desire, as a believer, to influence a change in this condition (p. 1-2). However, for its subjectivity, lack of empirical data, and theoretical weaknesses, the scientific value of the contribution remains dubious.

The author acknowledges at the outset that "a literary rather than academic [sic] form has been adopted in order to address a wide and general readership" (p. ix), and that "the book is thus part autobiography, part history, part literature and part science" (p. 3). Personal impressions, human encounters, and verses composed by the author, thus illustrate his arguments. In defence of gross simplifications, the author adds: "History will be presented here in broad sweeps, in ways which traditional historians may not approve. Society will be generalized about in a manner calculated to cause anguish to traditional anthropologists" (p. 9). The book, however, is seen as "a sociological exercise" (p. 231), with observations made in the capacity of "an anthropologist" (p. 101) and a "social scientist" (p. 211). We may, therefore, examine scientific viability on the main arguments contained in the book.

The pattern in the rise and spread of Islam, the dominance and decline of muslim empires, and the present decadence of muslim societies, in itself, constitutes

a theory for the author. In the course of these historical events (in which all societies incorporated within the fold of Islam are considered a unit) Akbar Ahmed sees "a rhythm, a flux and reflux, a rise and fall, peaks and throughs" [sic] (p. 31), resulting from the degree of affinity with or deviation from the Islamic ideal (as specified in the *Quran* and as exemplified in the life of the Prophet), with constant and renewed attempts within muslim societies to live up to it. This "theory of Islamic history" is proposed as the best framework for explaining the complexity of contemporary "muslim society". It is preferred to "the two traditional methods of interpreting muslim society", namely, Ibn Khaldun's "cyclical theory", and an anonymous theory of progressive decline since the "rapid, dramatic rise [of Islam] in seventh-century Arabia" (p. 30). Furthermore, Western social theorists, namely, Marx, Weber, Malinowski, and Levi-Strauss, are rejected on the grounds that their concepts were rooted in the European industrialized society in which they lived, which were coloured by colonial and racial prejudice, and are thus found inadequate for explaining "muslim society". A careful study of the works of Western social theorists cited above, particularly their analyses of non-industrialized societies (a later reference to Edward Said – p. 215 – in this line of argument notwithstanding), should make it evident that neither their theories (despite the controversies they provoked) nor the subsequent development of their thought by younger social scientists (in the light of perceived inadequacies) were consciouly or unconsciously restricted to the framework of the European industrialized societies in which they lived (or, as in the case of Levi-Strauss, are still living).

We may ask three questions of the author.

1. Akbar Ahmed rejects the capability of Western social theorists to provide meaningful frameworks for understanding non-Western and non-industrialized societies. He argues in favour of following the lead of Al Beruni and developing an Islamic anthropology for an analysis of "muslim society" and, from that bias, also analyzing non-muslim societies regardless of whether this is done by muslim or non-muslim scholars. Yet, how is it that the author's "theory of Islamic history" (seen as a synthesis between Western and Islamic anthropology) is almost entirely based on Max Weber's secular theory of charisma as a force of self-legitimation in modern history, his historically grounded sociological typologies or models, and his concept of the "religious virtuoso"?

2. We understand that not only muslims, but a great portion of the non-industrialized world was also colonized by Western Europe regardless of religion. In fact, a few muslim societies, for instance Turkey and Iran, were not colonized at all. How is it, then, that the sentiments the West provokes because of its position in the modern world, among muslims and non-muslims alike, are seen as exclusive to, or true in the case of, muslims alone?

3. Does the "theory of Islamic history", in fact, enable the author to explain

the complexity of "muslim society" and the problems it is confronting today, not to mention non-muslim societies? If so, why do his explanations remain insufficient, and why is there a hesitant admittance of partial failure (p. 11 and p. 215), ending in a conclusion more in keeping with the author's motive behind writing the book rather than with scientific reasoning?

Akbar Ahmed mentions the dangers of "narcissistic anthropology" and "Islamic chauvinism". Yet, his bias seems to paralyze his analysis. A narration of isolated historical events does not constitute a theory; nor does a description of any society by itself explain that society. Conceptual tools are indispensable for explaining the genesis, nature, and content of a social configuration, the logic central to the operation of this configuration, and the manner in which this configuration is historically transformed. There are apparent and latent, logical and illogical, intentional and unintentional, collective and individual elements in the constitution of societies at a given level of development – based on earlier forms of social existence and in relation to the society's natural environment – which carry within their composition the seeds of future evolution. Theoretical constructs, despite certain lacunae, can assist in "making sense" of societies.

Akbar Ahmed seems to be at a loss to account for the complexity of "muslim society", and for its domination or subordination by ideologies and systems which transcend its confines. This would not be so if he were to develop or use a theoretical framework that would enable him to either conduct an objective indepth study of a society or use holistic empirical research of other social scientists. He could thereby analyse the society (i.e., the network of relations within and between social groups that constitute a unit) at a given historical moment. In order to view that society in its global context, he could trace progressively or regressively its historical transformation. All muslim societies thus would not be treated as a unit, and an unreal importance would not be attached to their unity on account of their "muslimness". (Although Ahmed accuses anthropologists of not treating such "unity", he himself neither illustrates the theoretical and empirical validity of his contention, nor does he abandon the idea in the face of evidence to the contrary; simply because doing so would not support the point he wishes to make). There would be no need in this case, for an "Islamic anthropology" (nor a Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist anthropology for that matter). The impact that Islam has had on the psyche of the members of the societies brought within its fold, and the manner and degree to which this ideology has affected or failed to affect traditional social structures, beliefs and attitudes, would not be seen then as lying outside the scope of anthropological analysis.

Similarly, the all-paralyzing and all-destructive effects of the colonial encounter; the evolutionary paths followed by modern nations; the position they occupy in the world today; their inextricable link with their past, and their present

links with each other would be interpreted within related socio-historical contexts. This would provide the framework for viewing mutually negative and/or positive images held by these nations *vis-à-vis* one another, as well as certain "basic" and "universal" values they share in common – which, in fact, are neither so "basic" nor so "universal" as Akbar Ahmed would have us believe (see Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People.* London: Picador, 1974). The author displays keen awareness of the multifarious aspects involved in understanding human societies. A strong theoretical base and empirical research would enable him to put forward a scientifically viable thesis, rather than portraitures of a desire to order society the way he wishes it to be, as opposed to the way it is.

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