

Book Reviews

Islam Between East and West

by *Alija Ali Izetbegovic*

Published by: The American Trust Publications, Indianapolis, Indiana 46232, U.S.A. Price: \$12.00 (paper)

Islam Between East and West is a remarkable work of multidisciplinary scholarship by a Bosnian Muslim lawyer who is currently serving a fourteen-year term in a Yugoslavian prison for his Islamic activism and "fundamentalist digressions". Educated in Sarajevo and Paris, Alija Ali Izetbegovic has been active in Islamic work throughout his adult life. Writing, lecturing, and organizing Islamic educational and welfare activities, he has been a constant source of intellectual and spiritual inspiration for thousands of young Yugoslavian Muslims.

Alija's main objective in this book is to examine the roots of the cultural crisis, moral anarchy and political upheavals of the modern West and to show how these are related to the influence of partial truths and reductionist ideological perspective.

The central thesis of this book is that there are three distinct views of the world that reflect three different elemental possibilities: the religious, the materialistic, and the Islamic. Islamic worldview is integral in that it combines both pure religiosity and pure materialism. While pure religion emphasizes conscience and pure materialism emphasizes nature, the focus of Islam is on man who lives in the worlds of both conscience and nature.

The author then shows how both pure religion (Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism) and materialistic philosophies (Socialism and Capitalism) have given partial answers to life's integral questions of "ideals" and "interests" and how they have been trying to compensate for their primal inadequacies and half-truths through continuous compromises in both theory and praxis. The author argues on the basis of considerable historical evidence that the actual realization of these two opposing views of the world has been quite different from what they originally aspired to achieve. A modified, post-renaissance humanist interpretation of Christianity and the religio-moral basis of socialist egalitarianism with its teleological view of history clearly demonstrates that

it is impossible to be a consistent Christian or a consistent materialist.

It is with reference to these formulations and arguments that our author builds a case for Islam as a "Third Way", the only world view which takes into account both the spiritual and material needs of man. It is because of this integral world view that Islam has always been a target of attack from the two opposite directions: from the religion which considers it as "too natural, actual, and tuned to the world"; and from science which sees in it elements of religion and mysticism. Despite these apparently contradictory "right" and "left" wing tendencies, there is but one Islam which simultaneously reflects inspiration and experience, eternity and time, thought and practice, soul and body; in short, man's life in all its aspects.

The author shows how Islam played an important role as an intermediary between the ancient cultures and the modern West. He urges that Islam must again today, "in a time of dramatic dilemmas and alternatives", resume its role as an intermediary ideology in a divided world.

The final chapter of the book develops another interesting and rather provocative hypothesis: that England in particular and Anglo-Saxon culture in general (as opposed to the other European societies) have found a middle road between religion and materialism and thus bear a strong resemblance to the "Third Way" of Islam. Alija argues that English society, economy, polity, art and literature, and philosophy and social thought are the closest approximation of the bipolarity of the Islamic model. The author follows the parallelism between Islamic and English minds through series of examples from Roger Bacon to George Bernard Shaw. Elaborating on the meaning of Spengler's parallel between the Prophet Mohammad and Cromwell, Alija notes that, from the viewpoint of the philosophy of history, the emergence of England and the Anglo-Saxon spirit in the West has many things in common with the emergence of Islam in the East. It is no wonder, then, that while on the continent an empiricist, as a rule, will also be an athiest, in England, the father of empiricism, John Locke placed the concept of God in the center of his ethical theory and upheld the hereafter's sanctions in establishing moral principles for society. Spencer's *Education*, Alija argues, might very well have been written by a Muslim intellectual. The whole thrust of the Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, with its emphasis on the harmony between the individual and the society, egalitarianism, social responsibility, and the ethical bases of political economy, demonstrates clear correspondence between English and Islamic moral and intellectual traditions.

Not disagreeing entirely with Alija's hypothesis about the differences in Continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions of moral philosophy, the reviewer feels that the argument seems to have been stretched too far. Although Alija seeks to focus on the most historically significant variations between Continental and English social and moral thought and praxis, he tends to overlook cer-

tain important affinities between these two traditions, affinities that are obviously derived from the religious mainstream of Western Christianity. If we are not primarily concerned so much with causal relationships as with long-term consequences of ideas, even the Left Hegelians, with their passionate desire for social harmony and intellectual crusade for universalism and political reforms, could be traced to their cousins in the British Isles.

But this is a minor point. Alija knows his subject very well. He is well-versed in Western thought and is intimately familiar with relevant literature in physical, biological and social sciences as well as in humanities. He is particularly at his best when he discusses masterpieces of Western art and literature and offers new and often provocative interpretations of their meaning for individual and society.

Alija's critique of evolutionism and materialistic/scientific bases of human life is both comprehensive and devastating. He brings arguments in his critique from zoology, molecular biology, physics, chemistry, and cultural anthropology, and presents an alternative view of evolution of "civilization" as against the constancy of culture. His critique of humanism is similarly brilliantly conceived. He rejects the possibility of developing a secular ethics, an ethics based on the denial of God. In line with the other moral philosophers (Jacques Maritain, for example) he very clearly shows how concepts fashionable in contemporary humanistic philosophy (justice, equality, fairness, fraternity) become meaningless if they are not firmly anchored in the belief in God. Discussions on culture and civilization, mass culture, family, and community are also very forceful and illuminating.

Alija's view of Islam is closer to existentialists. To him, "Islam is a method", (one is quickly reminded of Sartre's *Search for Method*), and not a "ready-made solution". It is not something given; one has to discover it for oneself.

To me, this view seems a somewhat new interpretation of Islam, apparently contrary to the Orthodox view which regards Islam as a totally defined and once-for-all completed religion and a way of life. As far as I know, the only other Muslim thinker who comes closer to this view was Mohammad Iqbal who spoke of the continuity of the creative process in the universe and the opening up of new horizons for man on earth. But it must be noted that Iqbal's concept of the continuity of "*kun*" refers to physical and intellectual spheres and not to the moral sphere which, according to him, is "given" in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet.

It is probably because of this existentialist view of Islam that the author seems to acknowledge a continued persistence of "tension" even within the framework of Islamic bipolarity. That is, the tensions that he identifies in religion and science do not find their complete resolution even in Islam, although they do assume a new creative and sublime posture in Islamic bipolarity.

The major focus of the book is on the critique of pure religion and pure materialism. The only full treatment of Islamic alternative is in Chapter VIII, especially in its section on "Bipolarity of the Five Pillars of Islam." Thus the critique comes out as much stronger and convincing than affirmation. In terms of space and coverage, two-thirds of the book consists of criticism of religion and materialism or with the supremacy of art/religion over science. Discussion of Islam as a "Third Way" is relatively brief and sketchy.

Chapter III on "The Phenomenon of Art", though excellent in its own right, becomes larger than life in the context of the basic premises and objectives of the book. That is, it tends to present a highly exaggerated case in favour of the primacy of art and literature over science. It thus undermines the central thesis of the book, viz. that both are half-truths. Art and literature, in this particular case, become substitutes for religion and Islam. There is, however, a difference between the statement that art and literature are products of religious inspiration and the statement that they *are* religion as such.

Also, the author's view of religion is basically anthropological. Hence, he includes all kinds of ancient myths, superstitions, and magical rituals in his definition of religion. So far so good. But the problem arises when he equates this kind of raw and unstructured religious symbolism with the coherent and systematic theology and cosmology of revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and treats them at the same level.

Like some other contemporary Muslim writers – but not at the same magnitude – our author also commits at some places the familiar intellectual sin of comparing "our best" with "their worst". Perfected by the Christian missionaries and polemicists writing on Islam and the Muslim World, it has now been appropriated as a standard technique by some Muslims as well, especially in their da'wa-oriented writings. According to this technique, Islamic *norms* and *ideals* are compared with Western *practices* and *behaviours*, instead of comparing ideals with ideals and practices with practices.

Having expressed some minor disagreements on certain issues, I must conclude by saying that it is an excellent work of scholarship on the subject. A book of this type has to have some polemics in its style and presentation but, in the main, it is full of perceptive observations on matters of moral and social philosophy. The style is lucid and the presentation of arguments is brilliant and extraordinarily engaging. The author has a masterly grasp on his subject and knows the West from very closed quarters. Unlike many other Muslim intellectuals who have compared Islam and the West in terms of their world views and philosophical positions on individual and society, Alija does not impose a single standard of orthodoxy upon the West's entire intellectual history. He takes a more differentiating view of the intellectual history of the West and discusses important areas of divergence within both the atheistic and religious traditions. He is extremely well-versed in the intricacies of theological

debates in Western Christianity as well as in the controversies associated with the secular ideas of utopian politics. He draws fruitful comparisons between these two opposing intellectual currents and identifies certain important structural affinities between Islam on the one hand and some aspects of the Western thought and praxis, on the other.

Mumtaz Ahmad
Washington, D.C.