

BOOK REVIEW

La Pensée Religieuse en Islam Contemporain [Religious Thought in Contemporary Islam], Ziad Hafez, Paris, Guthner, 2012, 398 pp., ISBN 978-2-7053-3861-9

The book addresses the history of religious thought in Islam with a primary focus on contemporary and modern religious interpretation movements, their different schools and major texts. The author is obsessed by the need to dispel the stereotypical image of Islam in the Western mind as a single hypostatic world and body of thought devoid of diversity and pluralism, with no independent interpretation or freedom of thought. To dispel this image, he highlights efforts by Islam's major thought traditions, be they oral, philosophical or jurisprudential, as they jostle one another, signalling these thinkers' openness on the sources of ancient human thought (Greek, Indian, Persian, and local Arab heritage of the Jahiliyya period). He underlines the openness of these thinkers towards each other as well, despite their differences of opinion, frameworks and intellectual reference systems.

Another way Ziad Hafez dispels this image is by shedding considerable light on the renewal currents in contemporary and modern Islamic religious thought, particularly in the Arab world, and highlighting the courageous statements of various scholars and the depth with which they dealt with textual religious issues. He also shows how the initiators of these currents read and understood the text from a novel historical and knowledge-based perspective, without ignoring the adverse reaction against these renewal attempts and their main intellectual symbols, on the part of traditional conservative forces and contemporary fundamentalist Islamist movements. In his attempt to dispel these shabby and trite ideological images about Islam in some Orientalist discourses, and in the Zionist-inspired Western media, Hafez actually continues what the late Edward Said had started – as George Corm rightly observes in his Preface to the book – by refuting the veracity of this ever-present colonial view towards Arabs and Islam. He unmasks both its ideological nature, which is totally alien to science and historical reality, as well as the flagrant animosity deployed in the service of colonial objectives, reached by spreading Islamophobia.

The book comprises an Introduction and eight chapters in addition to a Preface by Corm, in which he expounds on the importance of the book in terms of perspective and substance, on its author, and the critical intellectual heritage to which he belongs. He lauds the author's courage in tackling closed subjects as far as religious thought is concerned, and for pinpointing instances of independent interpretation and renewal within it, and the inherent wealth that the West ignores and keeps hidden.

In the Introduction, Hafez stresses the point that Islam is not an introverted phenomenon situated out of time, but a constantly evolving entity capable of adapting to changing circumstances (p. 11), which is why its renewal dynamic still survives. The West's renewed view of Islam as an introverted religion breeding violence and hatred towards

the other generates Islamophobia and serves to perpetuate fear of Arabs (p. 14). In parallel to this defective view of Islam in the Western consciousness stands another subjective view of it embodied in Islamist fundamentalism, which separates Islam from its local and historical antecedents, that depicts these as ‘Jahiliya’ (ignorance) (p. 16). It is a view beset by nostalgia for an imagined forgone Islamic era, devoted to building the idea of a state based on Sharia (p. 17). However, just as the West has toyed with Islam, in its confrontation with Arab liberation movements during the Cold War and after demonizing it went on to accuse it of being an impediment to democracy (p. 20), Islamist movements also used religion in the struggle against their enemies.

In Chapter 1, which focuses on the image of Islam in the West, the author devotes considerable space to criticizing the way the West depicts Islam in academia, the media and political decision-making circles, especially in the wake of 11 September 2001. He unveils the hidden nostalgia behind Islamophobia for a bygone colonial era, a nostalgia that reached the conclusion – after the invasion and occupation of Iraq – that the ‘early end’ of colonialism in the Arab countries was the ‘wrong’ option (p. 25)! In this context, he points out the various forms that the official political, anti-Islamic, Western – mainly American – discourse takes, going all the way back to the mid-20th century, especially in the wake of the Cold War, including the inimical rhetorical violence directed at Islam and the Muslims. He quotes some of the language used – a language that adds fuel to the fire – and its impact on the symbols of Muslim fundamentalism (p. 28). He highlights various strategies in which the West has used Islam, at various instances of modern history, as a weapon in mobilizing the Muslim world against the Soviets or the Arab Nationalist movement; demonized it; institutionalized this demonization (p. 35); and portrayed the Arabs as a savage beast that should be tamed (p. 36). He then shifts to another facet of this colonial discourse, namely the ‘cultural discourse’ that favours the cultural anthropological perspective. It is a perspective that stereotypically classifies Islam stereotypically, and bases this classification on an ‘intellectual’ assumption that holds that every culture and society has a fixed ‘core’ (p. 39), and that Islam is the fixed core of Arab and Islamic societies, a core that is inimical to democracy, modernity and Western values. The author quotes various critiques by Arab authors, like Said and ‘Aziz al-‘Azmeh, of these stereotypical images of Islam as a ‘singular culture’, critiques that highlight the universal dimension of cultural values and criticize the writings of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis who adopted this ‘core’ assumption and a-historic view of Islam and culture (pp. 45–53). Hafez highlights the discussion currently taking place in the Arab and Muslim world, a discussion that contradicts this ‘core’ assumption and a-historic view of Islam, a view that began in the ‘renaissance’ period of the 19th century and still goes on today.

Chapter 2, which looks at various debates within Islam, addresses the roots of the intellectual debate among Muslims ever since the Prophet’s death and the outbreak of the quarrel over power and legitimacy. The author notes that what influenced Islam’s thinkers the most was the need to isolate Islam and its teachings from the overall conditions of history and to view it in the absolute (which is exactly what today’s Islamists do when they see an old Islamist influence). He believes that, in general, Islam’s heritage was impacted by the fact that it revolves round two major issues: doctrine and politics. It is on this premise, therefore, that he builds his analysis based on the idea that recalling the conditions of political development is a necessary and indispensable step in order to understand correctly the development of Islamic thought (p. 63), i.e. by looking at the centrality of the political issue in Islam’s history. The author thus

presents a comprehensive historical review of the centrality of politics in Islam, and traces the development of the issue of power and the struggle over it from the Prophet's death onwards. He tracks the formation and development of various groups in Islam: al-Khawarej (pp. 71–73), Shia (pp. 74–78) and al-Sunna wal Jama'a (pp. 86–91), as well as theologians, like al-Mu'tazila (pp. 78–83) and al-Asha'ira (pp. 83–86), depicting their rise, ideas and the differences between them.

Chapter 3, which looks at the debates that took place during the Renaissance period, highlights the contexts in which the Renaissance's discourse was crystallized in the 19th century (Napoleon's Egyptian campaign), and expresses the belief that this discourse did not entirely sever ties with the classical periods (p. 93). The chapter sheds light on the main intellectual themes of the period that are associated with the major figures, such as Rafi' al-Tahtawi (pp. 97–98), Jamal-Eddin al-Afghani (pp. 98–112) and Muhammad Abdo (pp. 112–130), and reviews the contributions made by important thinkers who added their own interpretation of the political issue (the modern national state and the constitution, for example), social issues, women's rights, etc. Hafez does this to indicate that ever since its inception, Muslim society has remained an open arena of debate and discussion and was not – like many imagine it to be – an introverted entity impervious to changes taking place around it (p. 131).

Chapter 4 stays on the subject of the Renaissance period, but focuses this time on the impact that the period's ideas have had on 20th-century generations. However, although the author classifies this period's intellectual currents based on a commonly used system in Arab intellectual history, i.e. either as belonging to the renaissance, nationalist and secular movement or as Islamist, he nevertheless identifies every current and goes back to the original intellectual roots of each. He classifies Taha Hussein as belonging to the first and Muhammad Rashid Rida to the second of the two main currents. In general, although the first was not entirely Westernized or Europeanized, the second retreated from the Islamist reformist ideas and their interpretations ever since Rashid Rida, whose writings paved the way for the birth of political Islam, and wrote about the caliphate (p. 148), up to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The writings of Ibn Tamimah, al-Maududi and Sayed Qutob became the latter's main cultural reference (p. 142). However, a generation of interpreters from among Muhammad Abdo's students, together with a group of reformers, kept paddling against the conservative current, chief among whom was Kassem Amin who was interested in 'women's liberation' (pp. 152–153), and Sheikh Ali Abdel-Raziq who wrote the reference book *Islam and the Fundamentals of Governance* (1925), a critique of the caliphate system (pp. 157–163).

After these four historical chapters, the author moves on to a series of applied studies that deal with examples of contemporary Islamic interpretation in explaining the Quran and understanding heritage. Thus, in Chapter 5 he presents a focused and comprehensive exposé of the most important theses of the martyred Sudanese thinker, Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, in his explanation of the Quran. He introduces him, his methodology and his views (pp. 182–196) paying particular attention to the basic distinction he draws between the first and second messages of Islam, considering this assumption the most radical and revolutionary of all Taha's work (p. 217). He does not forget to draw attention, however, to the ambiguities in Mahmoud Muhammad Taha's position when appointing the person responsible for the religious and legislative messages; was it the Prophet or the Prophet with others (p. 218)? It is a warning that goes along with the fact that Taha defines prophethood as having a direct relationship with the messenger of revelations (Jibril/Gabriel) and that its conclusion only means

that human beings are able to access divine knowledge without the intermediation of the messenger of revelations.

In Chapter 6 the author continues to focus on major figures involved in the independent interpretation of the Quran, looking this time at another sample, in particular the works of Muhammad Shahrour, especially his interpretation of the Quran. The chapter sheds light on certain aspects of Shahrour's personality, including his academic formation and reform obsessions (pp. 227–234), and quotes some of what distinguishes his interpretations methodologically. This includes his use of linguistics and language sciences, which explains why he was so interested in distinguishing between the different meanings behind various appellations of the Quran, such as al-Thikr and al-Quran, looking deep into their etymological origin in the Arabic language (pp. 236–245). However, although the author considers the distinction that Shahrour draws between the Prophet and the message as his most important contribution, he arrives at the conclusion, based on that, that it is this distinction that allows the delineation of the parameters which frame the way man understands each of these concepts. The reasoning behind this contention is that: what the prophecy involves, in terms of laws of existence and the universe, is beyond the realm of human consciousness, while what the message involves, the revealed message, has to do with human understanding (p. 247). In the rest of the chapter Hafez reviews Shahrour's rules of interpretation (pp. 251–256) and opinion on several issues, including religious rites (prayer, fasting and Zakat [alms giving]), the Sunna and Hadith (pp. 262–271), legislation on women (pp. 271–273), polygamy (pp. 273–274), inheritance (pp. 274–276), men's guardianship (pp. 276–280), etc., and he pinpoints where independent interpretations lie.

In Chapter 7, which the author devotes to introducing some of the new contributions in understanding heritage, he reiterates the statement – on which this book is based – that any attempt at renewal in Islamic thought needs necessarily and inevitably to pass through interpretation. However, the chapter veers in another direction in order to consider the criticism levelled by Sayyid al-Qimni and Sheikh Khalil Abdul-Karim against the legendary glorification of the first generation of the Prophet's companions and its symbols, embedded in the Muslim consciousness (p. 284). He also considers their criticism of this generation's denigration of the pre-Islamic period, and its description of that as 'Jahiliya' (period of ignorance). In this context, he discusses the writings of Sayyid al-Qimni on ancient legends linked to the monotheistic religions and others (pp. 286–299), and al-Qimni's attempt to dismantle these. He then addresses Khalil Abdul-Karim's writings on the 'Jahiliya' and his attempts to disprove the al-Qadhiya call in the 'Jahiliya', by showing the aspect of continuity between this period and Islam, as it embodies one of the sources of Sharia and legislation in Islam. In doing so, the author aims to continue what Taha Hussein had started in his famous book *On Jahiliyya Poetry* (1926) in an effort to reinstate respect for this period of Arab history.

Finally, the author dedicates Chapter 8 to exploring the contribution Nasser Hamid abu Zayd to the understanding of Arab Islamic heritage. He reviews the latter's criticism of the religious discourse, its contradictions and alienation from reality, especially in its current Islamist aspects, and its dire lack of historical sense in understanding the religious text. Hafez focuses on five of the dynamics that govern this discourse (pp. 331–343) based on the manner in which the subject-matter and rules crystallized in the 'thought' of Abil 'Ala al-Maududi and Sayyed Qutob, and critiques them. He also presents the cultural sources behind this religious discourse, stopping to consider Abu

Zayd's understanding of three of them: governance, (religious) text and the Hadith (Sayings of the Prophet).

The reader could well argue with the author over his choice of this particular group of Arab researchers in the field of studying and interpreting the Quran, and over neglecting other more important ones (such as Muhammad 'Izzat Darwazah's momentous interpretation of the Quran, Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah's analysis of the *qassass* [narrative] of the Quran, and Muhammad Arkoun and Abdul-Majid al-Shurafi's critique of the classical interpretation repository, etc.). The reader could also argue with him on the exaggerated importance he gives to the work of Muhammad Shahrour and for omitting to include Abu Zayd's stylistic interpretation of the religious text, in the relevant chapter. However, the reader will certainly not argue with him on the importance of doing justice to the work of Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, Sayyid al-Qimni and Khalil Abdul-Karim, even if he did not give the latter's trilogy on *Al-Sahabah* (the companions of the Prophet) due attention in Chapter 7.

This book is of utmost importance to the Western reader imbued with a stereotypical, a-historical, and shabby view of Islam and its heritage. Hafez wrote it in French to engage the inimical and unfair aspects of the Orientalist and neo-colonial discourses in a debate, discourses fashioned by the Zionist-inspired Western media, research centres and the writers associated with them. He also wrote it to shed light on the renewal and interpretation current in Islam, both past and present – a current that was kept hidden in Western works about Islam. However, if translated into Arabic, the book will also be valuable to the Arab reader, both specialists and non-specialists alike, since it provides solid material for a rewrite of the history of interpretation in Islam, contemporary Islam in particular.

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