

REVIEW ARTICLE

Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society

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Akbar S. Ahmed. *Discovering Islam:
Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*
(Lahore: Vanguard Books (Pvt) Ltd., 1988)
Price: Pak. Rs. 300/-, HB

The notion that social evolution generates its own spirit and conditions, necessitating a redefinition in religious thought, has been gaining a steady intellectual and popular base since Shah Wali Allah (d. 1763) began propagating it over two centuries ago. Living at a time of critical transition in Muslim history marked by the decline of Muslim political power in India, Shah Wali Allah's ideas inspired many religious-political and reformist-intellectual movements among Muslims that surfaced in South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The turn into the 20th century marked another period of critical transition for Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent as they sought to define their national identity and protect their economic and political interests in a rapidly changing context. This period was marked by the emergence of the Muslim League in 1906, the first political party formed by Indian Muslims, and the Khilafat Movement, a mass movement that became the first popular expression of Muslim political identity. Central to the

intellectual current underlying these movements were the works of Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), the first Muslim reformist to make systematic efforts for protecting the socio-political and economic interests of Indian Muslims under the British Raj. Syed Ameer Ali's contribution to this effort was *The Spirit of Islam*, a book that he published in 1891 and which became a catalyst in developing Muslim national identity. It also became a bridge for the Muslim's dialogue with the West.

As the world stands on the threshold of the twenty first century, for the Muslim intelligentsia, the urgency of the search for a contemporary idiom in which to define themselves is underlined by the conceptual vacuum permeating the Muslim experience. This is what makes Akbar S. Ahmed's *Discovering Islam : Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (Routledge, London, 1988), so important.

With Muslim civilization and history as his matrix and the analytical approach of a social scientist as his tool, Ahmed proceeds 'to make sense' of Muslim history and society by answering some fundamental questions: how are we to understand the history of Islam and its relationship with its society? What are the keys for understanding Muslim society to enable us understand what motivates Muslims and their behaviour and how to explain the turbulence in contemporary Muslim society? Dealing with questions that relate to the very foundation, meaning and function of Muslim society, its social evolution and history, is a formidable task. The answers cannot be sought merely by equipping oneself with a knowledge of Muslim history and methodological tools of analysis, without a searching commitment. Ahmed's book is a step towards this end.

The theoretical premise from which Akbar Ahmed embarks upon this project encapsulates 'the invisible mental background'¹ of Muslims — their ideals and motivations. If history is to be seen as an interpretation of human motivation,² then identifying the nature of this motivation for understanding Muslim history becomes a challenge, however, conjectural its theoretical premise. It is in this context that Akbar S. Ahmed's '*Discovering Islam*' could be viewed as an attempt to identify the motivational nucleus of Muslim history. Using Weber's concept of the 'ideal type', Ahmed coins the term 'Muslim ideal' for this mental background. This ideal derives from the seventh century Arabian society, when the Prophet administered and organized the Muslim community into an ideal society. According to Ahmed, 'the view of the ideal and aspiration to it, provides Muslim society with its dynamics' (p. 3).

Furthermore, this ideal is not predicated upon a monolithic vision, because individualistic interpretations of the ideal are bound to be different for different individuals and groups, regardless of whether they live at a given point in time or at different periods in history. Indeed, it is the tendency for diversity of interpretation which provides the ideal with an inbuilt mechanism for constant renewal of faith in Muslim society. It is in this sense that 'the constant pressure in Muslim society to reform, renew and change is neither modern nor new' (p. 4). Thus, as Ahmed sees it, 'the flux and reflux' of Islamic history can be explained by the quest for the Muslim ideal of the seventh century, aglow with the example of the Prophet and the Muslim community that he had helped to take shape according to the spirit of the new faith.

Clearly then, Ahmed does not view Islamic history as the rise and fall of the Arab dynasties; instead, he finds in Muslim societies 'a rhythm, a rise and fall, peaks and troughs stemming from the attempt to live by this Muslim ideal' (p. 31). Islamic history, then, becomes an attempt 'to live up to and by the seventh century Muslim ideal' (p. 31). It is in this sense that the 'Muslim Ideal' becomes the motivational nucleus of a view of history. And going by the social, economic and political correlates implicit in the notion of the Muslim ideal, the urge for the ideal inheres the quest for translating these correlates as working relationships and operative principles in an egalitarian Muslim society.

Ahmed further notes that while Muslim dynasties 'rise and fall', the ideal is 'constantly renewed by groups and individuals in different places and in different times'. And he invokes history to support his argument of Islam 'disintegrating' in one place while 'reviving' in another: while twelfth century Delhi was taken by Muslims, Baghdad was lost to the Mongols. In another century, Islam 'driven out of the Iberian Peninsula in Europe' established itself in the Deccan in South India, vanquishing the Hindu Kingdom of Vijayanagar. Also, juxtaposed with the conquest by Muslims of Constantinople, renamed Istanbul, the city of Islam, is the loss of Granada and its conversion into a Christian city. Akbar Ahmed then goes on to show that when Muslim empires disintegrated and the Islamic capitals of Delhi, Kabul and Cairo were occupied by Europeans in the nineteenth century, Islamic States emerged in different parts of Africa under leaders who were fired by the zeal to reassert their faith (pp. 31-32).

While the book provides a vibrant panorama of Muslim history and society, the author is at his best when dealing with Islam in South Asia.

His approach to find linkages between socio-political phenomenon of the past and the present leads him to draw geneological lines from Mughal India to Pakistan. Taking Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb as two types of Muslim representing two conceptual categories; the orthodox, legalistic Islam and the syncretic, dynamic Islam respectively, he goes on to argue that whereas the late Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reflected the conceptual position of Dara Shikoh, the late General Zia-ul-Haq could be viewed as a conceptual descendent of Aurangzeb. The unresolved tension between these two types of Islamic categories is projected to the present times, as Ahmed draws parallels in the death warrants Aurangzeb and General Zia signed to send their respective political opponents to the gallows. However, one could argue that political motivations rather than purely ideological considerations lay behind these death sentences. The urge for power, succession, and legitimacy are powerful motivational factors in their own right, which could always operate under the cover of Islam.

That Muslim societies are 'afflicted with a continuing legacy of the past' is an argument that Ahmed dwells into by analyzing what he terms as the 'central obsessions' of the various Muslim societies. He cites the examples of Turkey, Iran, Muslim India, and its inheritor, Pakistan. The central obsession of the Ottoman empire, Ahmed argues, was Christianity and Europe; for the Safavids rulers of Iran, Shi'ism, and for Mughals in India, Hindu civilization. The contemporary extensions of these 'obsessions' (or for that matter, security concern, or assertion of national identity) can be seen in Turkey's quest for joining the European Economic Community (EEC), the sustained effort in revolutionary Iran to bring about an enduring ideological transformation in the society by reasserting its cultural identity, and Pakistan's continuing security problems with India. One could however argue that what Ahmed terms national 'obsession', are in fact, a carry-over of the legacies of the past through the process of social-psychological conditioning. Indeed Malek Bennabi has identified sociological heredity as the root cause of Muslim inertia and as a factor that continues to shape the perceptions of Muslim nations in the mould of the past, regardless of the exigencies of the present. However, by spotlighting these political 'obsessions' as well as other social constraints of an outmoded era which have shackled Muslim society, Ahmed stresses the need for critical introspection to unshackle the Muslim mind and releasing the thought processes locked in the prison of an involuted past.

Ahmed's notion of a 'Muslim ideal' for interpreting Muslim history and society is not without its problems. It does not make much operative sense without the expressive categories of identity and legitimacy. This is to say that when articulated politically, the Muslim ideal has taken the form of religio-political movement that employ, and to varying extent rely, on religious idiom for securing political objectives. Most of the religio-political movements in Muslim history and also in present times have invoked the Muslim ideal for legitimating their struggle and also for affirming their Muslim identity. In the political arena, identity and legitimacy, then, are the operational parameters of the Muslim ideal; the expressive forms of religio-political movements at the core of which lies the Muslim ideal as a motivational factor. In other words, a religio-political movement propelled by the Muslim ideal in a given socio-political context, could express itself as an 'identity response', as a movement for preserving or asserting Muslim identity while deriving its legitimacy from Islamic referents. Here Muslim identity reflects the collective self-awareness which Muslims embody and reflect as a group.⁴ However, legitimacy and identity as expressive forms of the Muslim ideal may not necessarily be appropriated only by the oppositional forces challenging the status quo. They could also be used by forces of the status quo for perpetuating their rule. Whether the Muslim ideal becomes a factor giving legitimacy to oppositional political struggle or for legitimating the status quo, or acts as a catalyst for protecting and asserting Muslim identity, would be contingent upon the specific socio-economic and political-cultural context of the society at the given time.

As a conceptual key, therefore, 'Muslim ideal' becomes rather overloaded, skewed as it were because of Ahmed's attempt to convert it into an interpretive formula. Briefly put, Ahmed's formula posits that the conjunction of the ideal and actual is what Muslims strive for, that failure to achieve this ideal creates stress in a society: 'the nearer to the ideal, the minimum tension in society, the further from the ideal, the maximum tension (in society)' (p. 231). Even if the first part of this formula ('conjunction of the ideal and the actual') is accepted as a spur for Muslim history, the mathematics of the second part 'the nearer to the ideal, the minimum tension in society, the further from the ideal, the maximum tension' is problematic. After all, social, political and ideological tensions erupting in civil wars have plagued Muslim society since its earliest days; even during the phase of its 'sacred history'

spanning the rule of the four Righteous Caliphs. These conflicts pitted the Prophet's relatives, Companions and contemporaries against one another. Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's son-in-law and the fourth Caliph was murdered by Muslim dissidents; the Khawarij, a religious-political sect had declared war against him believing that their own interpretation of the Qur'an reflected the true spirit of Islam. Moreover, the 'deviation' in Muslim civilization which many scholars have attributed to the onset of dynastic rule of Amir Mu'awiya occurred at a point in time when Muslim society could not be said to be farthest from the ideal, as it was still peopled with many individuals fired by the zeal of the new faith, the Companions of the Prophet and his contemporaries.

The proximity of these intra-Muslim conflicts in time to the 'golden era' of the Prophet's rule seems to contradict Ahmed's 'proximity formula' which he justifies citing the *Hadith*: 'the best of my people are my generation, then they that come after them, then they that come after them' (p. 31). Indeed, if one were to accept the basis of Ahmed's 'simplified formula' it could lead one to the conclusion that Muslim society is doomed to recede farther and farther away from the seventh century ideal, a theological justification for spiritual regression along the image of the Big Bang theory. If we are to go by Ahmed's literalist interpretation of the above *Hadith* as the basis for his formula, history would become the matrix for the regression of the spiritual life of Muslim civilization and society. Surely, such a world view could not be attributed to the Prophet's Traditions, which, like the Qur'an, have their dynamic core and could also be apprehended along the dimension of spiritual immediacy, transcending the space-time continuum, rather than along a linear time scale that a literalist interpretation would lead one to.

Equally problematic, though less despairing, is Ahmed's notion of what he terms the 'Andalus syndrome': the sense of loss of which Muslims have become a carrier when their highly evolved civilization which 'ended abruptly, in mid air, leaving a permanent trauma, a sense of bewilderment in their society' (p. 160). Ahmed's syndrome could be traced to his moving visit as an undergraduate student to Cordova in Spain. In the deserted mosque of Cordova, this sensitive youth from South Asia felt 'a strange nostalgia, a bitter sweet emotion'. Reflecting on this experience, he writes: 'I failed to understand the inexplicable effect of Andalusia and the fate of its people – the Moors – over my mood. Later, understanding, I would call it the Andalus syndrome, the fear of extinction induced by the fate of the Moors, which would

permanently haunt Muslim society' (p. 2). Years after this visit, Ahmed experienced similar emotions while visiting Hyderabad, once a flourishing Muslim State in India. This led him to draw conceptual similarities between the Andalusian and Hyderabad civilizations. There seemed to be a synthesis of religion and culture between Hindus and Muslims in Hyderabad as between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Andalusia. Moreover, despite their political supremacy, the Muslims 'were never quite masters of the Iberian nor the Indian peninsula'. Finally, both civilizations ended abruptly, leaving a permanent trauma in their societies. Ahmed then goes on to describe the affective dimension of the Andalusian syndromes: 'a forlorn nostalgia, a pain, an emotion sometimes too deep for words, which haunts these societies. It is a yearning for a past that is dead but will not be buried, fear of an unreliable future which is still to be born' (p. 160).

Ahmed's unimitable expression, his eye for details, his sense of history, an analytical mind and an imagination that 'connects' the past and the present, give his argument a persuasive power which lures the reader into a concordant flow. But a critical appraisal confronts one with questions. To begin with, one could simply argue that what Ahmed experienced in Cordova as an impressionable undergraduate may well have been the experience of a sensitive soul, a seeker, who for the first time was gripped by the experience of the ineffable; of dissolution at the brink of which one's individual identity stands when juxtaposed with the experience of the eternal. It is this touch of the ineffable that generates the gentle suffusion of a bitter sweet emotion, a nostalgia and a longing, and indeed '*the fear of extinction*' affective states that form the leitmotif of *Sufi* experience. Viewed from this perspective, nostalgia and longing presuppose separation. And it is this spiritual sense of separation and longing, 'awe and exaltation', which permeates the mystic experience, so majestically captured in the *Sufi* tradition. A Punjabi *Sufi* poet sums up Ahmed's description of the Andalus syndrome by simply declaring '*Na mein 'Arshi, na mein Farshi*': I belong neither to the earth, nor to the heaven. Also, Jalal-ud-Din Rumi's *Mathnawi* opens with the reed-flute's lament, where the reed bewails its bitter sweet nostalgia for the reed-bed, from which it was cut and separated.⁵

Indeed, one could go on and say that the affective constellation which Ahmed terms as a specific syndrome is not merely a Muslim syndrome: it is an integral dimension of human experience. What Ahmed calls 'Andalus syndrome', Kundera calls '*Litost*'. As Kundera explains,

Litost is a Czech word with no exact translation into any other language. It designates a feeling, 'as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing' (p.121).⁶ Among the numerous facets of *Litost*, Kundera identifies a 'state of torment caused by a sudden insight' into one's own transient self. Such a feeling of the individual self perhaps stems from a juxtaposition of the ephemeral and the eternal. The 'Andalus syndrome', then, becomes a term Ahmed uses for this universal human experience. However the experiential and spiritual kinship that Ahmed finds between Andalus and Hyderabad is not altogether amiss. Indeed it appears that a constellation of alienation-generating conditions would sharpen the receptivity of some individuals, cultures and people to this dimension of human experience. This perhaps was the case with the Muslims of South India. Unlike the Muslims of other parts of the world, Indian Muslims in general and of the Indian 'heartland' in particular could not cultivate the sense of belonging to their own country, an alienation which according to a perceptive South Asian historian marks 'one of the greatest tragedies of Islam, comparable only to that of Islam in Andalus'.⁷

It also needs mention that other scholars too have noted the relevance of the 'golden era' (what Ahmed calls the Muslim ideal) as a spur for the various religio-political and reformist movement in Muslim history. Sami Zubaida, for example, uses the term 'sacred history' for the pristine period of Islam in which the Prophet ruled and organized the affairs of the Islamic community with divine guidance. This period became 'a model and inspiration for building a virtuous and just Islamic society in the here and now'. Indeed, as Zubaida argues in his seminal study, the notion of 'sacred history' is the common denominator for the diverse strains of political thought for the centuries. And he also shows that the diversity in ideas about 'sacred history' arises from different readings of it by different individuals. However, many Muslim thinkers regard the idea of reviving the golden era of the Caliphate as attempts for evading current problems and finding security in the idealized model represented by the first four Caliphs. Following Ibn Khaldun, Tahabdu-Baqi Surev, the Egyptian scholar, for example, holds that after the death of the Prophet, the Muslim community created the Caliphate 'as a matter of public interest, not of dogma'.⁸ Such views erode the intellectual premise of a Muslim ideal as a spur for Muslim history and the notion that Islam insists of reviving the 'golden era' in its previous form.

However, viewed from a dynamic as opposed to a static perspective – and Akbar Ahmed should have made it clear in his book – the notion of a Muslim ideal becomes an ever present possibility to be realized through creative struggle for social and political transformation. It is in this sense that the Muslim ideal becomes immediate and intimate in the contemporary Muslim experience as it finds expression in terms of assertion of Muslim identity and/or legitimacy in the ongoing struggle in the Muslim World. This is what makes *'Discovering Islam'* an important signpost in the history of Muslim self-consciousness. While Syed Ameer Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* electrified the strata of educated Muslims in South Asia by responding to the intellectual vacuum in their self-conception as a collectivity, over the years this book, in being the product of a given phase in the intellectual and political history of South Asian Muslims, lost much of its original 'charge' and immediacy. A factor that has often led many later day Muslims to a rather harsh criticism of Ameer Ali's book as they feel uneasy about his 'apologia' on Islam. No doubt such criticisms disregard the colonial context that gave rise to the book, but their persistence has underlined the need for a work that could respond to the needs of contemporary Muslims for defining themselves, their society and their history as they stand at the brink of the third millennium. In this sense, *'Discovering Islam'* is a timely response. Like any work of enduring significance, *Discovering Islam* is a product of a dual odyssey – through Muslim history and the author's inner world – which inevitably leads him to an encounter with his own self and his culture. The tension between personal biography and Muslim history, of which Ahmed finds himself to be a conscious part, gives this book a freshness that is unique. Ahmed remains consistently original in his analysis. His is a work brimming with insights, written in a style that makes it an irresistible reading.

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