

Whig Column
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In matters of religion, some scholars/ writers gain strong followings and influence vast numbers of people, while others are known only to a few.

Amongst Muslims there are remarkable scholars whose writings are exciting, challenging, thought provoking and yet they are unknown to the general public. At times it seems that the powers - to - be deliberately block access to this scholarship so as to maintain their particular position. This is a great pity because the writings of these scholars would lead to newer understanding and practices.

Part of the phenomenon is that some scholars are quickly picked up by would - be - politicians and become their guiding light. For example, scholars such as Syed Qutb's views on Islam, the Islamic state and his suspicion of the West are enthusiastically embraced by the Muslim Brotherhood, a political party in many Arab states. Another scholar, Pakistani Maududi, who also stated that Islam/Muslims require an Islamic state and "sharia" laws, is admired and followed by traditionalists and those who want a revival of the glories of the past. Another is Abdul Wahab of the Arabian Peninsula whose literalistic, rigid teachings have been adopted by the Saudis who have spread these to all parts of the world. These scholars were disenchanted by the West, by their own corrupt governments and turned to religion as vital in governance - thus the rise of political Islam.

A current scholar, Tariq Ramadan, is more difficult to place because of his conflicting messages. He lives in Europe, sees himself as a European Muslim, and addresses concerns facing Muslims in Europe. But at times it seems to me that his messages convey more than one meaning, and he does not sufficiently challenge the generally accepted teachings or norms.

On the other hand, there are innumerable scholars, writing within the framework of Islam, who have challenged the status quo of Muslim scholarship with their revolutionary ideas. These scholars are well known and respected within academia but their ideas are not as widespread or influential as they should be.

These scholars are not in agreement with each other, but their writings have the markings of intellectual rigour and excitement. What is exciting is their challenge of accepted dogma and their different ways of looking at the same issues and coming up with new understandings. These men and women espouse equality, social justice, tolerance, pluralism and democratic governance.

There is Nurcholish Madjid of Indonesia, Asghar Ali Engineer of India, Mohammad Arkoun and Marnia Lazreg of Algeria, Farid Esack and Ebrahim Moosa of South Africa, Soroush and Mir Hosseini of Iran, and Fatima Mernissi of Morocco.

For example, Abou El Fadl challenges the Wahabi teachings; Abdullahi An Naim insists that Muslims need a secular state to practice their religion; and women scholars such as Amina Wadud, Margot Badran, Kecia Ali, and Asma Barlas have demonstrated in their scholarship the equality of men and women in Islam.

The recent death of Egyptian scholar Nasr Abu Zayd is a loss to Muslim scholarship. He was harshly criticized because he used hermeneutics –scientific procedure for interpreting and explaining texts – for the Quran. Instead of impartial critiques of his ideas, he was accused of denying his faith and had to leave Egypt to live in Europe.

As an example of Muslim scholarship, let me tell you of the recent visit of the Pakistani scholar, Durre Sameen Ahmed who spoke on the Quran and Modernity.

She explains why the search for a definitive, single translation of the Arabic Quran - to be acceptable to all Muslims - is not a desirable goal to be pursued.

She gives the example of the number of translations of the Quran in English. Ahmed views this multiplicity of translations, not as something to be shunned, but as a demonstration of the diversity within Islam. She says it is “Islam’s greatest strength since it ensures that no single vision prevails over all others.”

Ahmed explains that there were five Muslim civilizations – Spain, Ottoman Turkey, North Africa, Iran and Mughal India- and though each was Muslim, they developed differently as each had its distinctive influences and culture.

She thinks that Islam encourages a “spiritually empowered individual” as distinct from the authority of experts because there is no centralized formal church. “Islam is pro-diversity, anti-authoritarian, and anti-monolithic” she says.

It is valid that each reader of the Quran brings to the text her own existential credentials and defined culture. Ahmed thinks that the modern trend of decentralized knowledge has the potential to re-empower the individual who can read the various translations and interpretations so as to know her Islam

The current push for only one form of Islam – the Salafi-Wahabi – coerces and silences the individual Muslim, and denies the diversity of Islam.

I find this perspective refreshing and encouraging because for far too many years there has been a demand for one Islam – monolithic, anti- diversity and literal. She acknowledges the “authority” of the reader; the multiple readings based on individual insight as valid, and encourages insight and feelings over reason alone. What I gather from Durre Ahmed’s scholarship is that the diversity and the empowered individual is the authentic Islam.