

Review

Richard K. Khuri, (1998) *Freedom, Modernity and Islam: Towards a Creative Synthesis*. Syracuse, 384 pp.

‘Modernity has reached several saturation points, so that there is more room than ever for the reconstruction of its moral and spiritual failings. If modernity consequently begins to show a mature and considerate face than it has of late, Islam is likely to relax its defensive posture, restored to confidence through the fact that its greatest offerings are concentrated in modernity’s greatest failings. This condition would be the best possible one for the meeting ground between Islam and modernity. The fruit will be a dynamic synthesis, in which modern innovation and creativity are allowed to transform Islam while Islam helps return modernity to the high moral values and spiritual impulses that were present at its origins.’

This is the well-intentioned formula that Khuri recommends as a panacea to the clash of civilizations. The author also provides solutions to the problems of both Islam and modernity. And Khuri picks ‘freedom’ as the central concept around which his synthesis is built.

As the civilized domains of our world have entered into the Post-Industrial Age, the philosophical pillars of modernity have come under close scrutiny. One does not need to be a ‘post-modern’ intellectual to believe that civilization has lost its moral values and turned man into an ‘economic animal’. Though man strove to free his bonds from the Enlightenment. The new Prometheus became more of a Dr. Faustus, who exchanged his soul for material gains. Man deified the universe and in his mind and his fixation on reason and rationality. As scientism became identified with mechanism, modernity believed in the physical precision of the clock.

Khuri does not lean on the foundations of the scientific revolution and its consequent impact upon social relationships. One would have expected a treatment of positivism, biological materialism, social Darwinism and secularism; more so how these currents affected the Muslim intelligentsia of the Ottoman Empire. Such a preliminary opening would have given more weight to his first chapter when he discusses orthodoxy, reform and reaction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, Khuri takes painstaking efforts to show how poorly the mechanistic version of the world represents science, how poorly science represents reason, and how much more there is in modernity than that which can be rationally justified. Chapter 2 is devoted to such out-dated illusions, and in the light of contemporary advances in the history of science Khuri emphasizes science to be an activity that transcends the scope of reason when it reaches its highest level. Khuri argues that ‘reason is always guided by something else, be it our moral and social ends or, within science, by thematic preferences that scientists are the first to concede have an aesthetic or metaphysical basis.’ (p.xxix)

One would have appreciated Khuri’s efforts had he engaged more on the ‘de-secularization’ of the sciences. If a more holistic picture of the paradigm shift from positive to normative sciences could have been shown, then some of the Muslim scholars’ work on the ‘Islamization of knowledge’ would have been more meaningfully attached to the text. It is surprising that the author makes no mention of I. Farouky, S. H. Nasr or N. Al-Attas in this context. Their works not only reflect the traditional Islamic emphasis of the rational with the spiritual (as Khuri describes on p. 48) but also bring them in accord with some post-modernist schools of thought could have made an interesting analysis, which the reader (or at least myself) would have enjoyed reading. Again, some references to Akbar Ahmed (on Post-Modernism) would have been well received.

Khuri has singularly set his mind on the synthesis, and therefore believes, unlike the post modernists, that modernity has contributed to freedom, if in a ‘negative’ definition of the sense. Thus, we come to the third chapter, devoted to a philosophical sketch of freedom. The negative sense of freedom, as Khuri explains, is that in which we emphasize our freedom to choose, whether among trivial or serious matters, and the opportunity we are given to do so through lack of interference from the authorities (p. 81). The West has this, but evidently this is not sufficient. According to Khuri’s analysis, we need to complement this with a ‘positive’ dimension. The positive sense of freedom is that in which we emphasize the quality of our choice and what we do with the opportunity we are given, the transcendent root of freedom, and freedom itself as meaningful expansiveness in a boundless world. And here comes Islam. Khuri writes ‘the modern state has shown itself to be inadequate where Islam is best, namely, with regard to the inner life of a society, to what really holds it together, to the emotional, moral and spiritual fabric of life. In these domains, Islam like other great religious traditions has very much to offer.’(p. xxiii)

Khuri's following chapters (4 and 5) furnish an excellent transposition of positive freedom. Here Khuri, correctly so, dwells on Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. Reflecting on the works of Ibn' Arabi, Khuri demonstrates how freedom is considered by the sufist a function of the individual's nearness to God. In other words, the actual realization of freedom in Islam is the degree to which it is able to keep alive within its soul leading to inner freedom. As Khuri explains, it is a matter of human identity that the individual discovers his Creator from his moral map. This transcendence, however humbly administered, could contribute to the building of personal ethics in man living in a materialistic environment. Yet, there evidently is a problem. How can the eternal elements of Islam be reconciled with the temporal?

Khuri then turns in Chapter 6 to the 'dark' side of the communal robustness in Islam, rooted in excessive preoccupation with the identity, unity and strength of the community. Khuri calls those so preoccupied 'communal extremists', who underline freedom thorough their persistently rigid understanding of what the Muslim paradigm entails. It is true that Western imperialism led to the birth of an insecurity complex in the Muslim Arab World, which in turn, in reaction, led to Islamic militancy. Khuri is not so much interested in the causes of so-called 'fundamentalism' in the Muslim Arab World; nor would he engaged in an explanation of political Islam, whose roots might be traced to the Umayyad dynasty or to Arab traditionalism. Khuri stresses that Islam, as a religion, might not necessarily be a 'state'; but one wishes that he would explain how. The division of state and mosque, so to speak, could have been an anathema. Khuri safely steers away from such troubled waters. Though he touches upon plurality in Islam, Khuri does not explain the recent polemics centering around the Medinean Paradigm expounded by writers like Ali Bulaç (in Turkey).

The greatest dilemma of the Muslim Arab World seems to be how to transform Islam from its geopolitical excesses (which the extremists wish to exploit) to its ethical core, from which it would contribute to Global Moralism. The first route would lead Muslims to fall into the trap of the Clash of Civilizations prophecy, but the second would make them partners in the attainment of a Global Society. I believe that Khuri also had the same apprehensions at the back of his mind when he wrote his final chapter. He probably believes that a lasting dialogue (and perhaps a division of labor) could be secured between modernity and Islam through the use of both faces of freedom. Possibilities for inter-religious dialogue against the new barbarism of recent modernity are implied in Khuri's following words: 'Just as Christianity is re-emergent in the face of an exhausted and demoralized

modernity (for all its muscle), so can Islam find strength in its preservation of the domain of moral and spiritual freedom.' One wonders why Khuri picked Gökalp (at all) and not Mehmet Akif; but he certainly made a remarkable epilogue by choosing (if not comparing) Iqbal and Nursi. One, again, wishes he had elaborated more on the last two and their disciplines to round up the final picture.

In the final analysis, Khuri's *Freedom, Modernity and Islam* is an inspiring book, with a noble aim. One can not but agree with Khuri that 'freedom would then be immeasurably enhanced under a broad synthesis between Islam and modernity.'

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