

BOOK REVIEW

Some Aspects of Islamic Studies

Author

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The 'Islamic Studies' is an ambiguous term as it has different connotations in the Islamic and Western contexts. In the Islamic context, the term is used to describe virtually all the academic discourses including traditional form of religious thought such as Islamic theology, Islamic jurisprudence and some other areas generally considered to be 'secular' in the Western context such as Islamic science and Islamic economics. In the non-Muslim context, 'Islamic Studies' generally refers to the historical study of Islam, Muslim culture, Muslim history and Islamic philosophy. A vast number of treatises have been written employing both the traditions by scholars across the globe. The book under reference, *Some Aspects of Islamic Studies*, is an attempt by Dr Afroz Ahmad Bisati to deal with the subject in the Islamic context covering varied issues including 'secular' ones. He has discussed some important matters of contemporary relevance in this small book containing ten chapters.

The first two chapters namely, 'Teachings of Islam' and 'Islamic Character', deal with various questions

concerned with the lives of every human being. Quoting extensively from the Quran and the Hadith, the aspects of justice, liberty, equality, tolerance, relations with relatives and neighbours, respect for life, respect for feelings and emotions and respect for parents and elders have been aptly elucidated upon. How seemingly trivial matters have been given immense importance in the teachings of Quran has been nicely explained in the following example: "Do not expect always others to come to you, but try to take initiative to visit others. This strengthens social relations. Avoid visiting others at late night as this may disturb their privacy and comfort" (p-13).

The significance of values such as faithfulness, honesty, obedience, politeness, mercy and discipline in social life has been well explained with examples drawn from basic principles of Islamic teachings in the third chapter 'The Human Values in Islam'. The examples have been drawn from the daily offerings of prayers five times a day: "Standing in perfect row, shoulder to shoulder with poor and rich inculcates the values of discipline, unity, equality and cleanliness

amongst the faithful.” This has been further explained while describing the significance of another principle of Islam, i.e. Zakat, which means purification. “It sows the seed of kindness, sympathy and benevolence. It reminds people of the needs and concerns of others and thereby makes them merciful, honest and thankful towards the bounties of God. Similarly by fasting a person controls one’s desires and distances oneself from prohibited things” (p-26).

‘Human Rights in Islam’ is the theme of the fourth chapter which covers a description of wide range of rights of an individual. Starting with the concept and its importance, the author has enumerated various human rights and has explained the manner in which these rights have been given significance in the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith. He has tried to emphasise with logic that these rights can not be abrogated by any individual since the origin of human rights in Islam is divine. While emphasising the rights of women, slaves, children and the rights to life and property, the author has quoted from the ‘Farewell Sermon of Prophet’, which is a milestone in the history of human rights in Islam. The Hanafi School of jurisprudence has also laid great emphasis on this issue. According to it, as quoted by the author, “The Government cannot acquire the property of its subjects unlawfully” (p-41).

An issue of far-reaching consequence i.e. ‘Status of Women’ is the theme of the fifth chapter, which seeks to clarify misunderstandings with regard to the image of women in Islam. Comparing with the conditions of women during pre-Quranic times, the author has

delineated the emancipated position of women after the spread of Islam. Drawing references from the Quran, he has described many rights of women such as equality in status, right to inheritance, freedom of marriage, etc. bestowed upon them. Quoting from the sayings of the Prophet, he says, “Man and woman have many mutual rights. They both have right to equal status and have equitable right of inheritance. They have right of freedom in marriage and can select or reject their prospective spouse according to their will” (p-58).

Chapter seven ‘Islamic Concept of Knowledge’ highlights the importance attached to ‘ilm (knowledge), which is not simply knowledge but an all-embracing term covering theory, action and education. It has been pointed out that in the Quran itself there are a total number of 704 verses where ‘ilm or its derivatives and associated words are used, thereby manifesting the importance of ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’. The author also highlighted the distinctive features of the approach of the Quran which lays emphasis on experimentation and observation. It provokes a Muslim to study the universe and find answers to why, how and what. It does not encourage blind imitation (p-77).

Chapter eight ‘Economic Teachings of Quran’ has references from the Quran, the Hadith and the works of Fiqh (jurisprudence) discussing economic resources, the acquisition and disposal of private property and the purchase and sale of merchandise. The redistribution of wealth through various forms of taxation and zakat (which means purification of one’s wealth by giving alms to poor according to Muslim law),

the borrowing and lending of money, the provision for the care and protection of elderly and economically deprived section of the society have also been discussed comprehensively. It has been pointed out that while carrying out various economic activities, Islam has emphasised that we 'to spend to improve the environmental conditions' (p-84).

Chapters six, nine and ten viz. 'Introduction to the Quran', 'Introduction to the Hadith' and 'Introduction to Fiqh' explain in detail about the divinity of the Quran and its revelation to the Prophet, meaning and importance of the Hadith and the meaning of Fiqh (jurisprudence) respectively. While discussing the Quran (revealed to Prophet Muhammad) in chapter six, the author has also delved upon the earlier divine books i.e. the Tauret (i.e. Hebrew Torah) revealed to Prophet Moses, the Zabur revealed to Prophet Dawood (David) and the Injil revealed to Prophet Isa (Jesus). It has been further explained that the Tauret is an Arabic equivalent which was actually revealed in Hebrew language. The Zabur, generally translated into English as 'Psalms' (sacred songs or hymns), contains praise of God in the form of hymns. The author has also dilated upon many modifications made to Injil (meaning Gospel, the religious doctrine reached by Christ) which now has twenty-seven versions. He has thus opined that Injil has not maintained its originality and authenticity.

Chapter nine is 'Introduction to the Hadith', explaining in detail the meaning and connotations of the word. Besides giving details of the process of compilation and preservation, the book also provides details about different types

of the Hadith (which means traditions with regard to sayings and actions of the Prophet). It mentions about some of the earliest and authentic compilers of Hadith as well as their method and strict rules adopted by them for compiling the Hadith. The author has also provided a list of important Hadith collections and a brief description about them.

'Introduction to Fiqh', the last chapter of the book, throws light on the meaning and significance of Fiqh (jurisprudence), a special area of understanding in the Islamic context. Fiqh is that branch of knowledge which deals with the issues related to shariah, covering all aspects of religious, political and civil life with regard to laws of inheritance, property, contract, criminal law, constitutional law and the laws related to various phases of administration (p-104).

The book is certainly a must-read for all those interested in knowing the Islamic perspective on various aspects of human society in general and Muslims societies in particular. The author has tried to cover a vast range of issues in this small book, therefore, obviously it was not possible for him to include all the minute details of a vast subject such as 'Islamic Studies'. If any shortcomings are to be pointed out, there are some typographical mistakes and breaking up of lines but this does not in anyway impede reading or mar the interest of the reader. A concise list of further readings has been provided at the end for those who are curious to study Islam.

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