

The Muslim Mind on Trial: Divine Revelation vs. Secular Rationalism

Abdessalam Yassine; tr. Muhtar Holland

Iowa City: Justice and Spirituality Publishing, 2003. 98 pages.

Abdessalam Yassine, a Moroccan Qur'anic scholar, passionately argues that Muslims need to return to the Qur'anic revelation and the prophetic method of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in order to resurrect the Muslim mind and worldview, which are currently subjugated to secular western thought. According to Yassine, the book's purpose "is the establishment and reminding of the Prophetic Method" (p. 25). This argument is made in the format of an introduction and 37 subject variants (ranging in length from a few paragraphs to seven pages).

Yassine juxtaposes the Muslim mind with that of the secular materialistic western mind, where the latter is shown to be deficient while the former, based on and nourished by revelation and the Sunnah, is considered to be truly emancipatory. He states: "When discussing the choice between two minds and two mentalities we have only two options: Either the sovereignty of the Revelation, pure and simple ... Or the sovereignty

of the arena, which occupied the other mind with its materialism, racialism and vagueness of its goals” (p. 9).

Throughout the book, Yassine provides some insights into Islamic spiritual practice and critiques mainstream western thought. Interestingly, his essay “Ritual Purity” eloquently points out the importance of situating the body in Islamic spirituality and how its purification is interconnected with inner spiritual growth. In addition, he does not romanticize the current Muslim ummah and shift all blame to the West; rather, he critiques the ummah for being coopted by western materialism.

However, I had numerous problems with this book, beginning with its premise. In an age of pluralistic societies, it is very hard to digest a discussion where one does not acknowledge that a pure “western mind” or a “Muslim mind” does not exist, because this assumption fails to acknowledge the difference and diversity among interpretations of text and ideas. Yassine employs the dominant discourses in both western and Islamic thought in order to forward his argument, which, in turn, leads to essentialism. Knowledge production is dynamic, and constructing such a binary framework perpetuates the idea that knowledge is static and fixed to a certain context, which only bolsters stereotypes.

One can infer that Yassine is trying to evoke a Muslim praxis in which we “may lead the human caravan” (p. 91). I find this argument and proposition to be arrogant and narcissistic. As Muslims, we need to accept the fact that we are just partners of this world and that when we start thinking of leading, we are trying to objectify as inferior those who are not like us. This supposition is very problematic, for our planet is filled with difference and diversity. We need to go beyond tolerance of difference and diversity, and ensure that such diversity is upheld to create a more just society through mutual understanding and the knowledge-sharing process.

In addition, by thinking in terms of universality and such pure categories as the “Muslim mind” and the “western mind,” Yassine perpetuates the colonial mission of being violent against those who do not fit neatly into his definitions and categories. While Yassine claims to be critiquing the colonizing effect of western imperialism, he actually is bolstering this same colonizer and colonized mentality by arguing for a different universal mind known as the “Muslim mind.” In short, an “us and them” rhetoric pervades the book and supports a dualistic mode of thinking.

It took me a while to read this short book, because it was difficult to move beyond the use of sexist/racist/ableist language and the author’s style of writing. Throughout the book, he uses “he” and “him,” which

renders women invisible. In some rare cases he does mention men and women. But when it comes to pronouns, Yassine uses “him” to denote both men and women. I find this very problematic, because it perpetuates the patriarchal language of Islamic scholarly discourse. Yassine also employs ableist metaphors to further his argument by calling those who do not fit in his “Muslim” mindset as being “deaf,” “blind,” and so on. One wonders whether this is because of the translation from Arabic or because the author employed such language.

Furthermore, Yassine makes many claims without elaborating further, a technique that leaves the reader with some frustration. For instance, with regards to a discussion on tourism in “Muslim” lands, he states: “We import AIDS with the blonde tourist whores. There settles in our lands a plague on top of the plague of the dollars that our children beg on tourist streets” (p. 76). These kinds of statements are left unsubstantiated, and the first sentence is, in essence, sexist and racist. Similarly, sometimes questions are posed and the reader is led to believe that an answer will come shortly. However, no such answer appears in the following text – or in the rest of the book for that matter.

For someone who brings a critical eye to this book, its arguments have many weaknesses. Powerful metaphors and language coupled with excerpts from the Qur’an and Hadith literature are used to convince the reader, rather than provide substantial examples from either Islamic or western literature. Many questions raised by the author also are left unanswered.

This book is a personal and visionary opinion of a Qur’anic scholar. It does not provide substantial new material, as it is like any text that discusses the prophetic method. However, it is unique in the sense that it focuses on the Muslim mind. And yet the Muslim mind is not necessarily discussed, because the author, while discussing the importance of how that particular mind is different from the western secular mind in terms of “*qalb*,” basically discusses the mind’s “*‘aql*” aspect rather than the “*qalb*,” which the author posits is central to the Muslim “mind.”

The book has some relevance to Islamic thought, as there is very little literature on knowledge production from an Islamic standpoint, and does make a contribution to that area. It also is short and gets to the point for Muslims who want to be inspired and have their faith and belief reinforced.

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