

Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age

R. Stephen Humphreys, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 297.

Between Memory and Desire is a joy to read, since it does justice to many misunderstood subjects about Islam and the Middle East. Humphreys' genuine effort to be objective saves him from dismissing the reality of the phenomenon he is observing with his subjective redefinition of it. Being objective need not involve giving up one's set of values: it is neither desired nor possible not to have any values. Rather, objectivity is frankly to admit that we do have values through which we respond to what we observe. Because the author does this, he quite successfully compares and contrasts his own point of reference, i.e. contemporary American values, with Islamic values. Humphreys' discussion not only will help the outsiders understand Islam and Middle Eastern phenomenon better, but also will enable the "insiders" to view how things look from outside and do self-criticism.

In the first chapter, *Hard Realities: Population Overgrowth and Economic Stagnation*, the author considers the difficult economic situation of the Middle East. Humphreys notes that powerful market forces of the first world have negative impact on the Middle Eastern economy, an effect persisting from colonial times. This point could have been emphasized more, for the impact of the global capitalist economy on the

Third World, which includes the Middle Eastern countries, can hardly be overemphasized.

In the second chapter, *From Imperialism to the New World Order: The Middle East in Search of a Future*, the author chooses three spots in the region to illustrate the dreams and frustrations of the Middle Easterners: Iran, Egypt and Israel-Palestine. His analysis of Iran is quite insightful. He is able to penetrate the Iranians' mind to see how the Iranians perceived the foreign presence in Iran as the roots of all evil. While talking about the situation of Egypt, the author points out that the Egyptian Islamic activists suffer from the same problem that the Islamic Republic of Iran suffers. He says that although Islamic activists promise all good things and do very well in charitable enterprises, they do not present a comprehensive economic policy. On the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the author remarks that the Palestinians should ultimately blame themselves for the disappointing situation they are in, since they could have behaved more realistically --for instance by trying to negotiate with Israel — instead of fighting it with terrorism. Yet, while rightly opposing the terror from the Palestinian side, one should not underestimate the state terrorism of the Israeli side.

The third chapter, *The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism*, talks about the ideology, which, according to the author, had the greatest impact in the Middle East in this century. Humphreys rightly points out that the Pan-Arabist leaders could not figure out how to place Islam within the ideology. For, while Arab nationalism wanted to emphasize the "distinction" of being Arab, Islam emphasized that the point was to be a Muslim.

In the next chapter, *The Shaping of Foreign Policy: The Myth of Madman*, the author demonstrates that the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states are not that shocking when put into their contexts. In fact, what is really difficult for westerners is not that the goals of Middle Eastern leaders are impenetrable, but, as the author puts frankly: "The problem simply is that these goals are not the ones we want them to have." (p. 83)

In chapter 5, *Military Dictatorship and Political Tradition in the Middle East*, the author discusses military rule in the modern Middle East and contrasts it with its medieval counterparts. He quite perceptively notes that the old breach between state and the society has not been healed since the efforts of modern Middle Eastern states in social change have been for the most part a top-down affair.

In the following three chapters, namely *Profane and Sacred Politics: The Ends of Power in the Middle East; Islam as a Political System and Jihad and the Politics of Salvation*, the author analyzes the role of Islam in Middle Eastern politics. Throughout these chapters we repeatedly come across several dilemmas manifested in Middle Eastern politics. First is the political ideal of Islam versus the actual political pattern of Muslim history in the Middle East. The second contradictory picture is of the role Islam played in modern times: while by the 1950's Islam seemed thoroughly excluded from the politics in almost any Muslim country, in the 1970's suddenly Islam surged back into the political arena. The major role in bringing Islam to political debate belongs to so-called "Islamic activists", with whom we will observe another dilemma.

As the author correctly points out, the problem of the Islamic activists in general — no matter whether they are in Iran, or Egypt or Syria — is the same. It is clear that they want to get the political power in order to establish a thoroughly Islamic system, but how they are going to establish it is not clear. Yet, I do not think that envisaging a contemporary Islamic system in full details is a possible thing. I think Muslims cannot work out the implicit requirements of the Islamic system until they collectively grasp the spirit of Islam and start practicing the explicit Islamic requirements. That is why the main argument of political Islam is not right: the primary thing the Muslims lack is not to have the political power in hand but to recover the *spirit and basic practices of Islam at a collective level*. In the present time when, as the author also notes, the majority of Muslims seem content with secularism in practice, an Islamic order can not be "cooked"— even if Muslims had a detailed legal recipe at hand. For the basic ingredient, a committed Muslim Community, is missing.

In chapter 9, *Women in Public Life*, the author discusses the place of women in Islam. The author succeeds in differentiating between what is manifested in Middle Eastern culture and what Islam actually wants: he points out that at many points the Middle Eastern custom overrides the Islamic teaching. His discussion of Islamic Law, however, is not that successful since it fails to link the Islamic Law with its theological background. The *tawhid* principle of Islam requires total submission of the human being to God, including his/her physical body. When this principle is overlooked, and one does not expect the Creator to define the borders of modesty or to regulate human sexual behavior, then it is inevitable that, like the author, one will wrongly trace Islamic regulations to patriarchal and patrilineal concerns.

The last chapter is on *Islam and Human Rights*. As the author rightly observes, the idea of contemporary western human rights is based on the sovereignty of individual, while from an Islamic perspective all rights emanate from the Creator and the individual is not seen as an ultimate criterion of value. This divergence in doctrines gives rise to several differences in the practice. For example, as the author rightly points out, according to Islam, a Muslim has the right to speak, discuss or try to find out the truth but no right whatsoever to promote falsehood and corruption. This makes perfect sense from an Islamic point of view, which defines freedom as doing whatever one wishes as long as s/he does not harm anyone *including him/herself*, but from a contemporary Western perspective this is seen as nothing but a restriction of freedom.

Although the overall presentation of the book is quite accurate, it contains several mistakes in certain crucial points. For instance while discussing the life of the Prophet of Islam, the author uses expressions like, "Then he shaped his teaching into a kernel of world religion," (p.151) giving the wrong impression that Islam did not have a universal vision from the very beginning. Yet, by simply looking at the first revealed verses of the Qur'an one could easily ascertain that Islam did start out as a universal religion.

Nevertheless, this book, which is addressed mainly to American readers, is highly recommendable both to non-specialist outsiders who are interested in the Middle East and to the "insiders," of course with a reminder that they should be critical while reading.

Umeyye Yazicioglu
Hartford Seminary
Duncan Black McDonald Center
for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations
Hartford, CT