

## Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise

By Akbar S. Ahmed. London: Routledge, 1992, 294 pp.

According to postmodernists, modernists have passed their intentional, planned, and personal assertions as laws to justify their oppression, injustice, terrorism, and exploitation of the poor peoples of the world for several centuries. A cursory look at the record of Euro-American colonialism and neocolonialism across the globe bears out this fact. One can think of their laws, totalitarian state regulations, the Nixon and Carter doctrines, and many recent resolutions of the raped United Nations as examples of personal beliefs and desires, even whims, justified as laws.

Paradoxically, the secular fundamentalist tradition of postmodernism itself has justified its own free-wheeling metanarrative as a revolt against all traditionalism without distinguishing between lasting and fleeting societal values. Sardar and Davies, in their *Distorted Imagination* (1990), illustrated this phenomenon by referring to Salman Rushdie's pornographic writings, such as *The Satanic Verses*. This characteristic confusion of postmodernism can be partly understood by the mission of one of its founders (Habermas), which was to complete the unfinished business of western modernism: a noble cause of enlightenment rooted in "objective science, universal morality, and autonomous art according to their inner logic." Baring the civil autonomy of art, tirades against objectivity and the universality of modernism and its morality are considered the very backbone of postmodernism.

Ahmed's book is an excellent exposé of this paradox of postmodernism as it relates to Islam. The quixotic western beliefs about, attitude towards, and treatment of Islam and Muslims as the new perceived enemies are part of its central theme. He sees for Islam, in its fresh encounter with the West and its powerful propagandist media, many problems and a promise. Keeping his tradition of critical self-evaluation, he points out many weaknesses of the Muslims and their present leadership. The promise, he feels, lies in the openness of the postmodernist and in the proven survivability of Islam's universal principles.

The book features six chapters preceded by a preface and followed by exhaustive references and the two usual indexes. Ahmed states in the preface that this book is an attempt to understand the present times in terms of their prospects and promises, and that his arguments are based largely on his south Asian background, which may be impressionistic without necessarily being chronological or sequential. In reality, it is a compendium of cogent proofs exposing the illogical nature of the images and impressions of Muslims and Islam constructed by the global media.

Probably voicing the feeling of concerned Muslim parents, the preface ends on a sobering note of personal fear for his infant daughter, Nafees, who, in living by Islam, may have to face a world that is "increasingly secular, cynical, irreverent, fragmented, materialistic and an age often hostile for a Muslim." In this fearful forecast, Ahmed adumbrates other major anti-Muslim international crises predicting the use of the same pattern of media involvement as in the United States-Iraq Gulf war to create a false perception of an Islamic threat to the entire globe.

In chapter one, Ahmed attempts to provide a theoretical framework for the entire book: a series of about twenty questions on the nature of the current and potential interaction between postmodernism and Islam. Many of these questions have now been answered, by such global events as Bosnia and Somalia, in more concrete terms than perhaps the author had imagined while writing this volume. Most of these questions pertain to: a) the Muslims' "suspicion" that they are being erroneously perceived by the West as its next enemy; b) what the Muslims' response should be to the West's attitude of hatred and hateful actions against them; and c) how Muslims should look at European culture—continue to repel it or find innovative and creative ways of dealing with its onslaughts in light of new global realities. In raising these issues and concerns, Ahmed has hit the nail on the head by pointing out the futility of Muslim attempts to ignore them due to the intrusiveness of the modern (perhaps post-modern?) media's reach into the crevices of their privacy.

By tracing postmodernism's history in the West, Ahmed has identified eight salient features: secular skepticism about the project of universalist modernity and anything-goes pluralism, modern mass media as its engine, an urge towards ethno-religious fundamentalism, a nostalgic linkage with the past, an urban culture of consumerism and materialism, the lack of need for a dominant group, eclecticism, and the resultant confusion in the name of free-for-all clarity.

This brand of clarity is readily welcomed by followers of mysterious faiths, including satanists, who do not expect any logical intellectual appeal in such matters and who are amusingly amazed at Islam's claim to plainness, reasonableness, and freedom from indefensible dogmas. These postmodernists kill reason by ignoring it. The Muslim response to postmodernism has been to brush it aside as Americanization, nihilism, and recycled modernism. While Ahmed can appreciate this outright rejection of postmodernism by Muslim scholars, he is disturbed by the absence of such cherished Islamic values as balance, compassion, and tolerance in mutual dealings between Muslims and non-Muslims. In particular, he holds Muslims responsible for the intellectual time warp between them and the West. Ahmed bemoans the Muslims' inability to deal effectively with the postmodern media to their deserved advantage and shows the fu-

tility of their chauvinism, withdrawal, emotionalism, and verbosity in responding to media charges of terrorism and anti-westernism

However, he is well aware of the "prized" problematic place of Islam in Bush's New World Order and also of how many anti-Islamic nations have joined heads and hands to assert that they have a "Muslim problem." The postmodernist analysis of the historical misunderstandings between Islam and the West sounds like a mixture of political, economic, and cultural reasons. The process of demonization of Islam as the worst threat not only to the West but to Muslims themselves is complete.

This leads Ahmed to a discussion of Muslim dilemmas and certain problems in their own society. He asks why a religion that advocates goodness, cleanliness, tolerance, learning, and piety is so misunderstood and reviled, particularly when it has always advocated the positions the West is currently taking on such social issues as drugs, alcoholism, and family life. Ahmed clarifies such major areas of misunderstanding as jihad, the potential role of women in Islam, and the duality of education in Muslim countries. He refers the reader to injustices and atrocities Muslim minorities are facing in various places. The West might also be surprised at the upsurge of Islam in unexpected places and at the unfaltering tempo of the global Islamic movement.

He has tried to locate the essence of Islam in its common origins with Judaism and Christianity and to trace the influence of the Greeks on all of them. He attributes the subsequent historical tensions between Islam and the West to the former's rejection of Hellenism and the latter's increasing departure from Christian values and absorption of Spartanism and Romanism into its psyche of power and control. This connection serves as a link between the first and the second chapters.

Chapter two is a comprehensive account of the cultural and psycho-spiritual connections between the Greco-Roman past and the traditional western preoccupation with the brute force of the male body and the beauty and sensuality of the female. The present western view of human life seems to hover around sex and belly to the almost total exclusion of its professed but never completely absorbed Christian ideology. Islam first accepted Greek rationality and then rejected it, a historical rupture that explains Islam's lack of sympathy for western postmodernism. Without it, the western media can only resort to oversimplifying the complex relations between Islam and the West and between Muslims and Jews.

Ahmed offers a detailed and well documented narration of how the Greeks have influenced western culture. In particular, Plato has had a perennial influence as a guide to life and is often equated with the very basis of western culture and philosophy. Hitler is shown to be the epitome of the Greeks' emphasis on the purity of the master race leading to the persecution of the Semites and also to the dubbing of blacks as impure. He shows examples of German scholarship influenced by the Greeks in their

hatred of Jews as mentally and physically sick, incurable homosexuals, dangerous to the body politic, and thus the ultimate objects of hate. The American education system also presents Plato as a symbol of freedom and liberalism reserved for the white race, which reflects his racism, fascism, gynophonicity, and phallogocentricity.

The Semites, however, differed with Greek concepts of divinity, prophethood, and humanity's total obedience to God. These basic differences further separated Jews, orthodox Christians, and Muslims from Europe's cultural impact. Particularly noteworthy is the difference in views on politics. While rabbinical Judaism emerged after the liquidation of the Judaic state, the western brand of Christianity separated church from state, and Islam fused the two. There is no priesthood or monasticism in Islam, and this abolition of priestly authority has always allowed Muslims freedom of spirit and egalitarianism.

Ahmed stresses the need for genuine interfaith dialogues among followers of these three great Semitic religions. In this book, he lays a firm foundation for such an intellectual interaction by an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in the historical performance of these three groups under the symbolic subsections of star, cross, and crescent respectively. The discussion's key feature is the common ground whereupon the proposed interfaith dialogues can start with an acute consciousness of failures on the part of each. He has brought out very clearly "the veritable Greek tragedy" of the Jews' inhuman treatment of the Palestinians, the western Christians' record of cruel and continued politico-economic and cultural colonization in the platonic rather than the true Christian spirit, and the roots of the centuries' long intellectual and political crises of the Muslim world attributable to both internal and external forces.

"Confrontation and Clash" is chapter three's thematic title. The author begins with the three encounters of the Islamic and western worlds: the rise of Islam in Spain and North Africa seen as aggressive and threatening to Christendom; European colonialism in Muslim lands, known for its brevity and brutality; and the current post-cold war clash of the two civilizations characterized by the global pervasiveness of the consumerist western culture and the self-complacent rejection of and merely passionate resistance to it by Muslims. The clash seems to be between violent passion on one side and a wall of incomprehension on the other. In fact, in the prevailing empires of the mind, this unwillingness to comprehend each other is mutual. As has already been mentioned, the miraculous media at the disposal of western culture has been playing its explosively sensational role in aggravating the encounter by demonizing Islam and Muslims. The latter have failed to comprehend the postmodernist nature of these media and the mind-set of those behind these powerful devices.

In this chapter, Ahmed has devoted considerable space to the American vision of the New World Order with its clearly racist might-is-right

message for the planet: Watch, we will guard our economic supremacy jealously, thereby reinforcing our preeminent political and cultural position. Reserve all the planetary resources for the white race without expecting their civilization to provide answers for the planet or its environment. Obviously, there is "too little Christianity and too much of the Greeks in this western world view." Nonetheless, anybody who dares to provide a sound self-analysis of these claims is readily marginalized.

In response to his rhetorical question as to what Islam can give to the global civilization, Ahmed admits that while the Muslim world appears to have little to offer at this juncture, Islam has contributed and can certainly continue to offer the world a great deal. He lists its past and potential contributions: a balance between *dīn* (religion) and *dunyā* (world); a corrective check to materialism in the form of piety, compassion, and a sense of humility; security and stability in family life; peace and fraternity; emphasis on knowledge as the highest level of human endeavor; change and reinterpretation of the Shari'ah based on reasoning; flexibility and rational choice in comprehending and implementing Islamic principles; and an elaborate structure for protecting and improving the planetary environment and its ecosystem.

Within the continued context of South Asia, Ahmed analyzes both the positive and the negative effects of European colonialism in Muslim nations. He discusses how the colonialists grabbed both the places and the people's minds through their military might and educational system, how they left a legacy of lackey dictatorships in various forms, and the tyranny that resulted from imprisoning the ummah in a nation-state framework. He blames both the foreign rulers and the subsequent south Asian leadership for the existing problems such as the Kashmir issue, which he calls a paradigmatic postmodernist Muslim movement. He identifies salient features of the current Muslim (not Islamic) movements.

In chapter four, entitled "Studying Islam," Ahmed appreciates postmodernism's broadening of the scholarly discourse on the one hand to accommodate a more tolerant and an objective study of Islam. On the other hand, however, the intervention by the West's popular media has affected adversely the level and quality of discussion. Thus shallow, impressionistic, and often deliberately derogatory assessments of Islam have led to a strident radicalization of Muslims. More sober voices on both sides have been drowned by destructive debates on them and their faith.

Ahmed provides us with a characteristic profile of the postmodernist intellectual landscape of the study of Islam in terms of two triangles of Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The first one consists of traditionalists, radicals, and modernists, and the second of traditional orientalists, new scholars, and media generalists. Unfortunately, the shallow so-called media "experts on Islam" seem to have won the day by resorting to cheap shots and oversimplify-

ing very complex issues concerning Islam. Since most Muslims, regardless of age, do not understand the nature of postmodern media and information, they have unwittingly played into the hands of media generalists, who have alienated the immature youth from their parents, who are not prepared to deal with this unexpectedly trying family situation.

He then offers a critique of the three elements of the Muslim triangle of Islamic scholarship in terms of the emergence of occidentalism as well as their different viewpoints and modus operandi of dealing with the West and also how the postmodernist media have treated them. He again deals in detail with the way the British media treated the Salman Rushdie affair and how the Muslim community there reacted to the media debates and their Muslim and non-Muslim participants. With regard to the non-Muslim trio of scholarship on Islam, Ahmed feels that while the hostile orientalist persists and continues to feed the shallow stereotypical negative impressions of Islam, there is emerging a new non-Muslim western scholarship that wants to learn, is sympathetic, and can be nurtured via friendship with Muslims and their willingness to learn the nature of media and information.

Chapter five, "Culture and Change," presents an interesting analysis of the western criteria to measure their cultural impact on the rest of the world, especially on Muslims: clothes, sermons in the mosque, humor, and art and architecture. It also looks into the role of the media and their propped up figures in influencing others. Ahmed illustrates amusing fallacies in those measures and points out how to the chagrin of the powerful West even puppet Muslim leaders have no option but to glamorize Islamic symbols to muster popular support and thus "fail the tie test." In most of the Muslim world, the mosque and its hyperbolic and oversimplistic sermons remain a barometer of the level and intensity of politics among Muslims: "As long as Muslims perceive injustices in the world, the sermons in the mosque will remain vindicated."

Ahmed assails western perceptions of Muslims' lack of humor and of cultural diversity, and gives examples of a long tradition of and an acute capacity for laughing and making fun of themselves. He offers a panoramic view of the explosion of colors in diverse Muslim lands. He believes that the openness, eclecticism, and pluralism of postmodernism will release the diverse Islamic art forms and architectural designs.

Tracing the recent history of cultural changes in the heretofore-xenophobic West, Ahmed believes that western culture has become more open and increasingly iconoclastic. Perhaps the West thought a corresponding Muslim desire to change Islamic culture would emerge. However, Muslims have turned to Islam's more authentic past, its ideology, and to a position of more explicit rejection of the West and what it stands for.

The rest of the chapter sets a stage for the final one by showing the devastating power, addictive nature, and global reach of the West's elec-

tronics media, especially television. Ahmed judiciously brings out its positive contributions to generating timely awareness of many crucial issues. He is adequately aware of the dangerous crossings of the television images between traditionally sacrosanct boundaries. It meets out the same or similar treatment to Madonna and the Pope, to the holy and the profane. Communications technology is already transmitting culturally loaded alien images across the world without waiting for the proper absorption by correspondents or their audiences, giving rise to their speculative and erroneous interpretations with devastating effects on people's lives.

The demonic role of the media is the central feature of postmodernism that defines today's dominant global civilization. Chapter six treats this vital subject exhaustively, as, according to Ahmed, nothing in history has threatened Muslims like the West's postmodern media. The politico-militaristic leadership of the United States says that its involvement in the world trouble spots will be determined by images flashed by the media.

The most important function of the pliant media is agenda setting and public relations. Remember how the Hill and Knowlton company trained the then-Kuwaiti ambassador's fifteen-year-old daughter to give an incognito false and crying testimony. She alleged that, during their occupation of her country, cruel Iraqi soldiers removed life support equipment from critically ill babies in Kuwaiti hospitals. This media-fabricated image helped sway American public opinion in favor of war against Iraq. Such image construction by the media has put Muslims on the defensive. Ordinary Muslims know the danger, but the elites have failed so far to recommend a method for dealing with the danger of such concocted images.

Ahmed has listed nine characteristics of the postmodern media that are indicative of its power, superficiality, racism, anti-Islamism, misinformation, and irreverence to authority. It has destroyed the family as the basis of human civilization. He posits a thesis: "The more traditional a religious culture in our age of the media, the greater the pressures upon it; the more grave the predicament; so the least pressure on Christianity, the greatest on Islam." In the final chapter, he also delves into the social ills of the West, particularly American views on human life and how the whole society, along with family as its metaphor, is collapsing.

What is and what should be the Muslim strategy to deal with these global dangers from the ubiquitous western media are also discussed. Admittedly, Ahmed raises more questions than he or any other Muslim can answer. The situation is fluid in more than one sense. I would like to commend Ahmed for a well-documented volume covering a vast array of issues, concerns, and problems currently facing Muslims and for giving a feel of things likely to come. The book reads well and its language titillates like postmodernist paintings. His analysis of many international issues, especially the Gulf war and its implications for the Muslim ummah, could have been better informed in terms of the war's unavoidability. The

