

Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality

By Pervez Hoodbhoy. London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1991, 158 pp.

One may wonder why the author wrote this book. In his own words:

The germ of the idea grew from a lecture which the Lahore Education Society invited me to deliver in May 1984 on the subject of Islam and Science. Those were bad times for the country in general, and academics in particular . . . numerous charlatans and sycophants, responding to the regime's rhetoric of Islamization, had seized the reins of society and set for themselves the task of "Islamizing" everything in sight, including science. (p. xiii)

and, on his own secular and anti-Islamic attitudes:

Indeed the last section of this book is a reprint entitled "They Call It Islamic Science." This is an exposition and critique that was inspired by the First International Conference of Scientific Miracles of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah, organized in Islamabad by the International Islamic University during the time of General Zia. Originally published as an article in the Pakistani monthly magazine "Herald" (January 1988), it drew vituperation and abuse from proponents of the new so-called "Islamic Science." (p. xiv)

Thus the question: Can the author deal competently with such an interdisciplinary subject? According to Hoodbhoy:

I wish to state unequivocally that I have no illusions and make no claims to mastery over the subject of this book, Islam and science, or even of the philosophy of science. It was quite unwillingly, and with considerable trepidation, that I embarked on a project so far removed from my field of professional concern—particle and nuclear physics . . . I would have preferred someone with a professional interest to have done this job instead, but it seemed unwise to wait indefinitely for it to happen.

Thus we encounter a biased writer far from his specialization. As a result, the issues raised and discussed are inevitably less objective and credible. First of all, Hoodbhoy uses inaccurate quotes to prove his points. On page 111, he writes: "It was not hard for the ulema to convince the ruler (the orthodox Sunni Caliph Al-Mutawakkil) that the philosopher (Al-Kindi) had very dangerous beliefs." The exact quotation is: "The sixty-year-old al-Kindi suffered more when two competitors convinced the caliph that the philosopher was dangerous and untrustworthy" (J. B. Hayes, ed. *The Genius of Arab Civilization*). There are other examples, particularly in the appendix "They Call It Islamic Science" (pp. 140-54). When faced with some of these mistakes, he carelessly replied on the pages of the *Herald* magazine:

I plead guilty to a monstrous error and humbly beseech the reader of this magazine for his forgiveness. In truth, the word "universe" was inadvertently substituted for the word "soul." If any reader was misled by this, then I apologize. By confusing one absurdity for another, I made a mistake fully as serious as forgetting to cross a t or dot an i. (p. 152)

Moreover, he selects only examples and information that fit his ideological viewpoint. Thus he follows a reductionist approach to Islam. When explaining the scientific underdevelopment of contemporary Muslim countries, he presents several singular cases and infers from them the general impression that Muslim society is analagous to medieval Europe, where the Christian church fought violently against science. He points to *The Motion of the Sun and the Moon and the Stationary Nature of the Earth*, authored by Shaykh Ibn Baz of Saudi Arabia. To be fair, one must protest this unseemly opinion, made by another religious scholar, which is noted in the same publication. Furthermore, such an opinion does not prevent Saudi Arabia from sending the first Muslim astronaut into space.

In the case of al Ghazālī's views on rational sciences (pp. 104-7), Hoodbhoy ignores, either consciously or otherwise, al Ghazālī's positive views towards mathematics and natural sciences in particular. To be fair, one must argue that such a man, writing around 1100 CE, could say that "a grievous crime indeed against religion has been committed by a man who imagines that Islam is defended by the denial of the mathematical sciences," seeing that there is nothing in these sciences opposed to the truth of religion. One must also acknowledge that this scholar stressed in his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al Dīn* the acquisition and creation of those sciences necessary for the development of Islamic society: medical sciences, farming, and arithmetic. He promoted their active cultivation and advancement by

the ummah as an obligation (*fard kifāyah*) that could be discharged on its behalf by certain individuals.

Hoodbhoy defines "Islamic science" by limiting it to the practice of scientific miracles in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. This approach is based on his anti-Islamic slant. His identification of the main trends in this area is presented ambiguously, and several points are obscure. In fact, most of the relevant literature advocates the view that the Qur'an, while inviting us to cultivate science, contains many observations on natural phenomena and includes explanatory signs that are in total agreement with scientific facts. It is true that there are warnings to unqualified Muslims who indulge in Qur'anic and hadith exegesis, but this does not represent a total repudiation of such a practice. Unfortunately, this highly interesting and seriously objective point of the subject is completely absent in the book.

In this connection, Hoodbhoy, as a materialistic physicist, could not understand the moral philosophy behind the graph indicating the increase of divine reward (*thawāb*) predicated on the increase of the number of persons attending the congregational prayer (p. 147). In fact, it simply shows the importance and significance of group interaction for implementing and developing further Islamic concepts. Such studies could show how practicing and propagating Islam could help produce such people as the sixty men with Khālid Ibn al Walīd who overcame sixty thousand, the unarmed 313 at Badr who overcame one thousand armed opponents, and the galaxy of classical Muslim scientists.

Furthermore, the graph reveals the significance of collaboration, which is so important in modern scientific work. Objectives are achieved by projecting a proper philosophy of knowledge and science and reinterpreting the moral and social implications of science and technology in their proper perspective. The result is a unified whole in which faith, devoted religious observance, practical morality, and science and technology with economic growth all find their proper places. Of course, these implications are hard to meet with a materialistic dogmatist saying that "individual scientists, like a toiling worker ant, are but minions helping in the construction of a giant repository of human knowledge. That some, or all, of them may be notoriously immoral characters who drink heavily and beat their wives is beside the point" (pp. 8, 11).

At one point, Hoodbhoy contradicts himself. On page 47, al Afghānī is an opponent of scientific discoveries, while later on he is an advocate of western science and a prototype of pragmatic thought in Muslim countries (pp. 59-62). And, speaking of "determinism" on the basis of quantum physics, he reports that "quantum mechanics has indeed led to profoundly disturbing new ideas, some of which appear to be the direct negation of commonsense" (p. 16).

