

### Book Review

## Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society

By Akbar S. Ahmed. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1988. pp. 251

This book, written by Akbar Ahmed, is particularly apt and to the point. The book's title and subtitle seem, to this reviewer at least, an accurate reflection of its content: it has an introduction also called "Discovering Islam", then two major sections (each divided into chapters of unequal length; the first and longer on "The Pattern of Muslim History" and the second on "Contemporary Muslim Society" (with a conclusion again entitled "Discovering Islam"). As Ahmed states at the outset, he writes as a committed participant in, as well as an observer of, Islam, and furthermore, he makes no bones about his "South Asian" (read "Pakistani") perspective and bias with respect to Islam as a whole.

Ahmed has already observed in some of his earlier work, that there is only one Islam, not many "islams" (contrary to the views asserted recently by a number of non-Muslim students of the subject); and this is so despite the wide range and disparity of Muslim societies around the globe. Neither of these arguments is original with its present proponents. Ahmed puts forward both his view of the Islamic ideal, as well as the way some Muslims order their lives with respect to this ideal, with surprising force and vigor.

He states, "Economic, political and ethnic-social, cultural pressures act to compromise notions of the ideal, thereby creating ambiguity around it. The demarcation of Muslim societies is therefore not division between *white* ideal and *black* non-ideal, but an ongoing relationship between the two marked by areas of grey. Taken together the arguments will assist us in our search for . . . an Islamic world-view of society and history" (p. 5). A further very telling quote which reveals the book to be neither an apology for, nor an attack on, the West (of which its author is admittedly and justifiably critical), but a clear statement: "While the twentieth century cannot reject Islam—it is here to stay as a force; in turn, Islam must accept the twentieth century. It will not go away, and rejection is the easy way out. Islam must come to terms with the twentieth century; by doing so it will come to terms with itself" (p. 8).

In the first section of the book we are taken on a tour of Islamic history. It is of necessity selective, but both the wide-angle lens shots, as well as

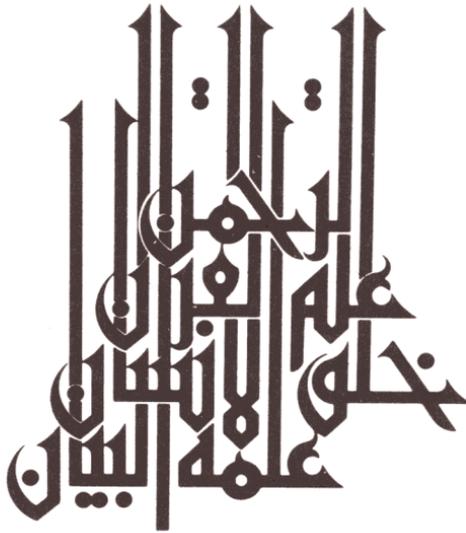
the more closely focused ones in greater detail, so to speak, of particular periods and time-depths in Islam, are illuminating, gratifying and well chosen. Ahmed's own experience in climbing Mt. Ḥirā' outside Makkah, while he recounts that of the Prophet, gets his book off to an excellent start; and after a discussion of the Prophet's life and mission (with a useful genealogy for non-anthropologist readers on p. 18), he gives us good looks, in turn, at the four ideal caliphs, the early and properly Arab dynasties (the *Umayyad* and the *ʿAbbāsī*, as well as the *Umayyad's* offshoot in *al Andalus*), the triad of Muslim empires (Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal), Sufis and scholars (with special emphasis on al Biruṇī and Ibn Khaldūn; two of Ahmed's most illustrious predecessors as Muslim anthropologists), Islam of the periphery (in China and the USSR), Islam under European colonialism and—now forming the second part of the book—Contemporary Islam. In this context, various themes that seem particularly well handled are the gentleness of the Prophet himself (in stark contrast to Western misconceptions), *Shīʿism* as revolution within the Revolution, *Mahdism* and *millenarian* movements, and in the context of Ahmed's own home region, the comparison and contrast between the Mughal ruler, Awrangzeb, and the late president of Pakistan Zia al-Haq on the one hand, and Awrangzeb's brother Dara Shikoh and Pakistan's late president Z.A. Bhutto on the other (pp. 77-84). In the chapter on the colonial period, which also deals largely, although not too exclusively, with India/Pakistan, Ahmed also shows us his not inconsiderable talents as a poet, while managing at the same time, to downgrade the overriding colonialist view of the "savage but noble tribesman", whether Berber, Bedouin or Pukhtun.

Yet it is in the second section, on Contemporary Muslim Society, where Ahmed offers his candid critical analysis of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Also his remarks about the fights between local Arabs in the United Arab Emirates and immigrant Pukhtun workers from the Pakistan North-West Frontier Province, are obviously not fabricated accounts. The pauperization of Muslim society in South India is graphically contrasted with Arab's super-opulence. And because Ahmed is a Pakistani, the problem of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan is one to which he gives (rightly, in this reviewer's opinion) preferential treatment over that of the Palestinians—while nonetheless noting that 75% of the world's refugees today are Muslims. For Muslims have traditionally met confrontation, assault and attack from outside Islam in one of two ways: *jihad* or *hijrah*, struggle or flight—to which, in both senses, the Afghans have responded magnificently, either with outright *jihad* or with *hijrah*, in order to take the *jihad* back home.

Islamic society (or societies), perhaps more than any other, has a nostalgia for the "golden age" (that of the Prophet, the four caliphs and the two succeeding *Umayyad* and *ʿAbbāsī* dynasties); and thinking Muslims are acutely aware of how far from the achievement of this historical state of assumed perfection

many present-day Islamic societies are in actual fact. As the author says, the dilemma posed by Islam coming to terms with the twentieth century (and especially, as this American reviewer notes, with the United States) is indeed that of Islam coming to terms with itself. With this verdict, we can only agree; and the only very minor fault we can find with the book is that of occasional errors in the transliteration of Arabic terms in the text. Otherwise, this is a most rewarding production, amply fulfilling the promise contained in its title and subtitle.

Reviewed by David M. Hart



*God Most Gracious.*

*It is He Who has taught the Qur-an.*

*He has created man.*

*He has taught him speech and intelligence.*