

ISLAM - A CHALLENGE TO RELIGION by G A PARWEZ - A Review by R. McWatt

In the West a common area of debate in moral philosophy is the conflict between religious and secular/humanist bases for moral systems. However, this debate is usually confined to the conflict between Judeo-Christian and Humanist beliefs - systems with which Westerners are familiar through the experience and traditions of the society we live in.

The passage of time has seen Britain become an increasingly multi-racial society, as a result of which we are becoming aware of the existence of culture and traditions of long standing of cultures beyond the local experience of Western culture. What challenges to our perceptions of coherent moral systems arise from this influx of unfamiliar ideas ?

G A Parwez was a prominent scholar and writer, born in 1903, who wrote 'Islam - A Challenge To Religion' in 1968. A controversial work, challenging not only Islamic but world wide perceptions of the nature of religion and of religion as a basis for philosophical systems informing moral action.

The questions of what precepts we should follow in order to live a morally good life has plagued theologians and scholars throughout history and transcends ethnicity, nationality and culture.

In the West, the conflict is often envisaged as between religion (with divine revelation as the basis of its moral precepts) and secularism (based upon scientific, reasoned or logical systems of derived from the ideas and actions of humanity); Mr Parwez, however, seeks to go beyond these parameters regarding Islam as a challenge to the common perception of religion, which he sees as a sophistry created by man for his own purposes.

That priestcraft and organised religion may be used to promote base, immoral, self serving and political purposes by men is not in itself a new concept in Western thought - the Protestant challenge to the legitimacy of the Papacy and the Marxist proposition that religion is a force used by capitalism to delude and repress the proletariat are famous examples of such thinking - and any study of history will provide examples to support such claims.

Parwez is aware of this view, and challenges Western (as well as conventional Islamic) definitions of the concept of 'religion' by proposing a moral system based on divine revelation, as made by the prophet Muhammad and set down in the Quran, yet not considering that system to fall within his definition of the concept of 'religion'

Parwez argues that the Quran can be proven to be a book whose content is pure and intact, its content exactly the same as that which was originally revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore a valid basis for a consistent theory of moral conduct that is both the revelation of the will of God and a logically sustainable moral philosophy meeting the intellectual requirements of mankind.

Contrastingly, the Bible Parwez claims, is not a consistent and original document whose teachings are directly attributable to a divine source. This is because the Bible is a piecemeal document, added to over the years from a variety of sources and interpreted by men serving political and theological purposes of human rather than divine origin. This, according to Parwez, is the effect organised religion imparts when the interests of man encroach upon the pure tenets of divine revelation. Whilst the world of Islam has not been free of such taints, Parwez argues that the Quran has, and has such can claim to have retained its authenticity and as such can be regarded as a source of morality transcending the attempts of man to impose his designs upon its integrity.

Parwez then goes on to introduce Westerners to a novel concept that has no counterpart in our theology or philosophy - *din*. This is an elusive and difficult concept for Westerners to understand and many will find (like myself) that they are culturally ill equipped to comprehend it with confidence.

Though Parwez provides a glossary for his readers, he admits that some of the terms (including 'din') have no precise English equivalent. This makes study of Parwez's ideas difficult, since one is never quite sure whether one is interpreting his writings correctly and the concept of 'din' is central to his philosophy.

Din may be loosely classed as: a code of conduct; a source of moral authority; a way of measuring action and of deciding the appropriate moral path to follow; a way of ruling, but also of obedience and submission. It is all these things at once but has no comparable counterpart in Western theology or philosophy.

Parwez argues that acceptance and obedience to din forms the basis of appropriate conduct in a moral person and is validated by its conformity to the precepts given in the Quran. To the Western mind this is consequently a moral system based upon faith (as distinct from the idea of 'religion' discredited in the definition given by Parwez)

Parwez argues that there is an innate and universal desire on the part of mankind to satisfy spiritual needs, a state of affairs that renders materialist or sense based moral systems inadequate to satisfy the whole needs of mankind.

Parwez believes that 'religion' is a construct of human origin, serving the shifting needs of power groups controlling its administration but 'din', contrastingly, is not an expression of the dictates of man but a life force acting in accord with the divinely ordained tenets of the Quran. Grasping this concept of the division between the spiritual and physical aspects of man's consciousness is vital to following the ideas expressed by Parwez.

Parwez believes that his moral system is compatible with the modern world because it is concerned with the spiritual welfare of mankind whereas the concerns such as science and politics are rooted in the material and physical requirements of humanity.

How does this square with the psychological and philosophical beliefs current in the Western world? Using an example of my own, let us compare the moral theory of G A Parwez in relation to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory seeking to explain the evolution of human behaviour. Maslow argues that human behaviour is governed by the desire to satisfy a number of innate drives. In the early stages of evolution mankind was preoccupied with the need to satisfy the most basic of objectives - the requirements of obtaining food and shelter. Once these basic needs are met there arises a desire for security - to retain possession of these gains. When this desire is met there comes a third stage - the desire for acceptance; sometimes this takes the form of sexual satisfaction, though it may also be interpreted as a need for the admiration or esteem of others. Maslow sees these desires as a hierarchy; the most primal needs - food and shelter - being dominant with each succeeding desire co-existing with the others as natural components of the human condition. The fourth desire to arise is for power, to have a measure of control over one's environment, the fifth and final stage being the desire for meaning.

Parwez would have little difficulty in accepting that the first five, physical, desires were common to mankind as a whole and perhaps would be able to embrace the concept that they developed as a hierarchy. He could not, however, accept the desire for meaning as being at the apex of a hierarchy, as he believes that the desire for spiritual fulfilment - the desire to find life meaningful - is innate and at the core of man's consciousness and is universal, rather than being a feature only arising late in man's evolutionary development, as is the case in Maslow's theory.

Parwez believes in free will and moral absolutism and argues that acts that go against the immutable laws of morality damage the spiritual well being of the individual, regardless of the physical effects that may arise from them. For instance, a man may steal a large sum of money and enjoy pleasure and comfort from spending it, nevertheless he pays the price for his action of spiritual and moral damage; a moral society will expect retribution for his action and will not be satisfied until it is exacted. Then, and only then - when the wrong act has been required

- will forgiveness be given. Parwez believes that forgiveness, once requital has been enacted, is an essential component of the moral society and, that for all aspects of the moral system he advocates, this has the backing of the Quran. In consequence of this, Parwez believes that his system has the force of being a God-given code. The code advocated by Parwez takes a hard line on personal responsibility and is governed by the ethic of principle, in which the ethical concerns of results or intentions have no part. He argues that a man cannot escape the consequences of his actions if, for instance, he does wrong in a fit of abstraction or with good intentions.

Whilst saying that a man cannot escape responsibility for his actions Parwez insists that the Quran offers a gospel of hope. A man may repent his wrong actions and redress them with good actions. Heaven and hell, he says, are not physical places but states of self.

Parwez is critical of both Capitalism and Communism: the one concentrating wealth and power in the hands of an unscrupulous minority, whilst the other defeats this evil only at the cost of denying the freedom of the individual. Parwez argues that the Quranic order enjoins men to work for the good of others, without becoming immersed in a diffusion of responsibility for action from the individual to the state or society, thereby denying individual responsibility.

Parwez regards work as a good in itself, regardless of its nature and imagines a society where people are motivated to work because it is for the good of all. Because of this he is opposed to structures that he sees as opposing the 'incentive' to work (such as the Welfare State - an institution of which he has, to this writer's mind, a poor understanding). In these perceptions he succeeds in being in line with both right wing and left wing Western political philosophy (The hard right oppose the Welfare State because it is supposed to diminish the incentive to work; Communists see work as only validated as being undertaken for the good of all society, rather than the enrichment as an elite few - both perspectives that appear in Parwez's writings)

Parwez describes the ideal society as the 'Rububiyyah Order', which is incompatible with the practices of laissez faire Capitalism, stressing the misery and inequality inherent in such a system and anticipating the excesses of the globalisation of Capitalist economics, which have arisen at the end of the 20th century and continue into the 21st.

In some aspects his philosophy resembles Socialism in that it recognises the illegitimacy of the possession of great wealth and prosperity in few hands (as I write this it is the case that the richest 5% of the American population own as much wealth as the remaining 95% combined). Parwez also believes that labour should be rewarded in line with the needs of the individual and not in line with market forces (One is reminded of the Marxist dictat 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need') However, he differentiates the 'Rububiyyat Order' from Communism in that it respects the personal worth of the individual rather than reducing him to a mere component of a socio-economic machine.

Parwez is also critical of Democracy, which he sees as in decline, having degenerated from a system aiming to represent the genuine desires of the people into a delegate system whose actions represent the narrow objectives of elites. Underlying this criticism is a concern on the part of Parwez that the desires of the majority may be selfish and immoral, going contrary to the absolute moral standards of the system in which he believes. Something that is wrong cannot become right because the majority vote for it. (Echoing Ibsen's statement in his play 'An Enemy of the People' - 'A man who is right is a majority of one')

Parwez draws extensively on the ideas of prominent Western critics of the shortcomings of Democracy - Menckel, A.J. Toynbee, Aldous Huxley, Hertz and Bertrand Russell among others - and argues that the world is in a transitional state, foreseeing a world where a Divine Social Order will eventually arise. He believes that many Western thinkers are disillusioned with the existing state of world affairs and that the answer to these concerns are to be found in the establishment of a rule where the will of God, as indicated in the teachings of the Quran, governs the affairs of man.

It is without doubt that the moral system advocated by Parwez is rooted in faith (rather than religion) and the secular critic finds this disturbing because, though he may agree with many aspects of Parwez's analysis, his insistence that the system he advocates is validated by being the expression of Divine Will precludes many scientific and philosophical lines of dispute.

The promoter of an ethical system with a result or intention led basis will always be faced by Parwez's insistence that his ethical system has Divine backing in that the Quran, from which it is derived, is the word of God.

Similarly such groups as Atheists, Agnostics, Communists, Existentialists and Logical Positivists (to name but a few) are condemned as pure materialists at odds with Parwez in his claim that because the desire for spiritual fulfilment (or as Maslow would say - the desire for meaning) is a common human experience that this in itself validates not only the belief in the existence of God but also the belief that the Quran is the sole source of Divine Revelation (at which point Christians and other religious groups join their voices to the opposition to Parwez - along with the unlikely allies nominated at the start of this paragraph).

Parwez makes uneasy reading for the Western thinker, not least because many of the concepts central to his beliefs have no equivalence in Western ideology. Despite the glossary, the Western reader has an idea of such concepts as 'justice' and 'religion' that run contrary to those held by Parwez.

However, the Western reader will still obtain from 'Islam - A Challenge To Religion' a basic grounding in radical Islamic thought (for Parwez is a controversial figure in the Islamic world, his ideas running contrary to more traditionalist theologians and writers) and will gain from reading it some insight into the moral precepts of a faith to which so many of the human race subscribe. In doing so they will face the eternal human paradox - how alike yet how different are the belief systems of humanity.