

Book Review

Understanding Islam, by Frithjof Schuon (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963)

Review by Martin Lings

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Here, at last, is a book which has long been needed.

Most of what is written about Islam for the West falls short of the mark, though not always for the same reason. Books by Moslems seldom show any real understanding of Christianity, and where Christian readers are concerned this is no small fault—a fault that is moreover greatly aggravated when, as often happens, the author seeks to demonstrate the superiority of his religion on the grounds that it is “progressive” and in harmony with the modern world, which amounts to a falsification of Islam. As to what non-Moslems have to say on the subject, all too many of their books are, as it were, Parthian shots fired at Islam in retreat from unsuccessful attempts to convert Moslems to Christianity. If, today, the shot usually takes the form of “damnation with faint praise” rather than direct attack, this modification is not enough to transform a more or less worthless book into a book that is of real value. Then there are those scholars who do not believe in any religion and who write about Islam from a “psychological,” “sociological” or “ethnological” point of view.

Frithjof Schuon’s book—the sixth of his works to be published in English¹ — escapes altogether from the above-mentioned categories. He sets out “not so much to give a description of Islam as to explain why Moslems believe in it,” and such an intention, however normal it may seem, is in fact extremely rare. *Understanding Islam* is, moreover, rich in references to other

¹ The other five are: *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Faber, 1953); *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Faber, 1954); *Language of the Self* (Luzac for Ganesh, 1959); *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Murray, 1959); *Stations of Wisdom* (Murray, 1961).

religions, to Hinduism and Buddhism and in particular to Christianity, and almost every mention of Islamic doctrine or practice is still further elucidated by a mention of what corresponds to it or takes the place of it in the religion of the Western world.

There are four chapters, each dealing with a fundamental aspect of the religion: “Islam,” “The Quran,” “The Prophet,” and “The Way,” this last chapter being devoted to Islamic mysticism, which is generally known as Sufism.

The first chapter treats of the religion as a whole, and contains, amongst other things, an exposition of the main differences between the Islamic and Christian perspectives.

In considering, apart from questions of dogma, “the basic reason for the mutual lack of understanding between Christians and Moslems,” the gist of what he says is that in the domain of action Christianity leaves far more, to the conscience of the individual than Islam does, or in other words, lays a far heavier responsibility on the will. The Christian’s faith and his heroism are continually being put to the test. Being thus “accustomed to a more or less exclusive idealism of the will,” he fails to realize that in Islam the full weight of responsibility falls, not on the will, but on the intelligence, while the far-reaching law balances the will and keeps it under control. The law is, in fact, for the Moslem, “a system of channels divinely predisposed for the equilibrium of his life in so far as it is subject to his will, and this equilibrium, far from being an end in itself...is a basis for escaping, in peace-giving and liberating contemplation of the Immutable, from the uncertainties and turbulence of the ego. To sum up: if the attitude of equilibrium which Islam seeks and realizes appears in Christian eyes as a calculating mediocrity incapable of reaching the super-natural, the sacrificial idealism of Christianity is liable to be misinterpreted by the Moslem as an individualism contemptuous of the divine gift of intelligence. If the objection is raised that the average Moslem does not concern himself with contemplation, the answer is that no more does the average Christian bother himself with sacrifice; in the depths of his soul every Christian nourishes an urge to sacrifice which will perhaps never be actualized, and in the same way every Moslem has, by reason of his faith, a predisposition to contemplation which will perhaps never actually dawn in his heart.”

At the risk of simplification, which the author is always at pains to avoid, it might be concluded that whereas Christianity is the religion of Love, Islam is the religion of Truth or “the religion of the Absolute,” though this must not be taken to mean that either religion has the monopoly of any positive quality. It is simply a question of stress. Moreover, “there is not only a Christianity of ‘warmth,’ of emotional love, of sacrificial activity, but, framed within this, there is also a Christianity of ‘light,’ of gnosis, of pure contemplation, of ‘peace,’ and in the same way the Islam that is ‘dry’—whether legalistically or metaphysically—encloses an Islam that is ‘moist,’² that is to say, much preoccupied with beauty, love and sacrifice.”

“The Prophet said: ‘God has created nothing more noble than intelligence,’³ and His wrath is

² “The terms are used here in an alchemical sense.”

³ In Arabic *‘aql*, which denotes the Intellect and its projection in man, or in other words, all that lies

on him who despises it,' and he also said, 'God is beautiful and He loves beauty.' These two sayings are characteristic for Islam: for it the world is a huge book filled with 'signs' (*ayat*) or symbols—elements of beauty—which speak to our understanding and are addressed to 'them that understand.' The world is made up of forms, and they are as it were the debris of a celestial music that has become frozen; knowledge or sanctity dissolves our frozen state and liberates the inner melody. Here we must recall the verse in the Quran which speaks of the 'stones from which streams spring forth,' though there are hearts which are 'harder than stones,' a passage reminiscent of the 'living water' of Christ and of the 'well of water springing up into everlasting life' in the hearts of saints."

In the chapter on the Quran, the very rigorous Islamic conception of revelation is explained, a conception that is identical with the Jewish one. What is meant by a revealed or sacred book or message is defined as follows:

"Imagine a tree the leaves of which, having no kind of direct knowledge of the root, hold a discussion about whether or not a root exists and what is its form if it does: suppose a voice then came from the root telling them that the root does exist and what form it has; that message would be sacred."

As regards the difficulties of all kinds which are to be met with in revealed books like the Hindu Vedas or the Jewish Torah as well as in the Quran, they spring from "the incommensurable disproportion between the Spirit and the limited resources of human language; it is as though the poverty-stricken coagulation which is the language of mortal man were broken into fragments under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word, or as if God, in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his command and so was compelled to make use of allusions heavy with meaning, of ellipses, abridgements and symbolical syntheses."

Let us quote also the following:

"One reason why Western people have difficulty in appreciating the Quran and have even many times questioned whether this book does contain the premises of a spiritual life lies in the fact that they look in a text for a meaning that is fully expressed and immediately intelligible, whereas Semites, and Eastern peoples in general, are lovers of verbal symbolism and read 'in depth.' . . . The Oriental extracts much from a few words: when, for example, the Quran recalls that 'the world beyond is better for you than this lower world' or that 'earthly life is but a play' or affirms 'In your wives and children ye have an enemy' or: 'Say: Allah! then leave them to their empty play,' or finally, when it promises Paradise to 'him who has feared the station of his Lord and refused desire to his soul'—when the Quran speaks thus, there emerges for the Moslem⁴ a whole ascetic and mystical doctrine, as penetrating and complete as no matter what other

between the Divine Intellect and the human reason. It cannot therefore be limited to the mind, for although it includes mental intelligence, it far transcends it. The word "intelligence" is used in this transcendent sense throughout the book. (Reviewer's note.)

⁴ "Note that we say 'for the Moslem,' not 'for every Moslem.' "

form of spirituality worthy the name.”

Not the least interesting part of this chapter is a comparative study of what different religions teach about the posthumous states, with special reference to what is taught about Hell.

There are also commentaries on those verses and phrases from the Quran which are continually being repeated by the Moslem and which are, as it were, an extension of the five canonical prayers throughout his daily life.

“The verses of the Quran are not merely sentences which transmit thoughts; in a sense they are beings, powers or talismans; the soul of the Moslem is, as it were, woven of sacred formulae; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives and in these he dies.”

The Quran, in its own way, penetrates the entire life of the individual, as does the religion as a whole with its doctrine for the intelligence and its law for the will; and the Prophet himself fulfils the same function.

“The Prophet, like Islam as a whole, is, as it were, a heavenly mould ready to receive the influx of the intelligence and will of the believer and one wherein even effort becomes a kind of supernatural repose.”

This passage in a sense echoes what the author has already said of the Quran:

“The Quran is, like the world, at the same time one and multiple. The world is like a multiplicity which disperses and divides: the Quran is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the Holy Book—the diversity of its words, sentences, pictures and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability *by a sort of divine ‘cunning.’*”

The extreme amplitude of the Prophet has a function in Islam which is parallel to this Quranic “multiplicity”; and the author reminds us that in fact the Prophet’s favourite wife, when asked after his death, by those who had never known him, what he was like, would sometimes reply that he was “like the Quran.”

The amplitude of Muhammad is also inseparable from his function as bearer of the last Revelation.

“If the Prophet is the ‘Seal of Prophecy’ this implies that he should appear as a synthesis of all that came before him; hence his aspect of ‘levelling,’ that something ‘anonymous’ and not to be numbered, which is apparent also in the Quran.

“The Prophet represents both universality and primordality, just as Islam in its deepest meaning is ‘that which is everywhere’ and ‘that which has always been.’”⁵

Mention has already been made of Muhammad’s function as a “mould” for the intelligence

⁵ It is altogether characteristic of Islam that its *credo* begins: “We believe in God and His angels and His books and His messengers. We make no distinction between His messengers.” (Reviewer’s note.)

and the will. With regard to the will, the author stresses the fact that Moslems “love him and imitate him even in the very smallest details of daily life.” In this respect it was the function of the Prophet to abolish all profanity and worldliness. Hence his “deliberate entry into the earthly and social sphere—we do not say: into the worldly and profane sphere” in order to bring about “an integration of collective human life into the spiritual realm.”

As regards the intelligence, the Prophet represents “Platonic idea, cosmic and spiritual symbol, unfathomable Logos.”

“Each traditional form identifies its founder with the divine Logos and looks on the other mouthpieces of Heaven, in so far as it takes them into consideration, as projections of this founder and as secondary manifestations of the one Logos; in the case of Buddhists, Christ and the Prophet can only be envisaged as Buddhas. When Christ says that ‘no man cometh unto the Father but by me,’ it is the Logos as such who speaks although for the Christian world Jesus is truly identified with this one and universal Word.”

Above and beyond his function as Logos, Muhammad represents “extinction” and “permanence,” extinction because he is not the Absolute and permanence because he is “not other” than the Absolute. Thus it is that in Islam the state of supreme Sainthood is defined not as “deification” but as “permanence after extinction.”

“The Sufi, after the pattern of the Prophet, wants neither ‘to be God’ nor ‘to be other than God.’”

The last chapter, on the path of the mystics, is in one sense a full development of something which has necessarily been present throughout the rest of the book, for the title promises us, in virtue of the word “understanding,” that we shall be given access to Islam’s dimension of depth, and this dimension, in Islam as in all other religions, is nothing other than mysticism.

It is only the Moslem mystic or Sufi who fully corresponds to the Islamic conception of man as defined in the opening chapter “a theomorphic being endowed with an intelligence capable of conceiving the Absolute, and with a will capable of choosing what leads to the Absolute,” just as it is the Sufi who is the most immersed in the Quran and who comes nearest to filling the “mould” that is set before him in the person of the Prophet.

The earlier chapters touch on the truth that our intelligence is no less than the projection of the Uncreated Intellect which lies in the depth of our being, and that for this Intellect, which is itself Divine, the only adequate object of contemplation is God Himself. That is why, in religious doctrine, it is in a sense easier to grasp what is of primary importance than what is of secondary importance, or to use the author’s own words “the Absolute is less difficult to grasp than the tremendous abysses of its manifestation” and “only the Absolute is perfectly intelligible in the strict sense, so much so that it is only in It that the intelligence sees its sufficient reason and its end.”

The chapter on the Way develops this still further: “Metaphysical truth with all that it

implies lies in the very substance of intelligence; any denial or limitation of truth is always a denial or limitation of the intellect; to know the intellect is to know its consubstantial content...and this is why Greek gnosis says 'Know thyself,' the Gospels say 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you,' and Islam 'Who knows himself knows his Lord.'”

What then, it may be asked, is the function of religious Revelation?

“Revelation is the objectivation of the transcendent Intellect and to one degree or another ‘awakens’ the latent knowledge—or elements of knowledge—we bear in ourselves. Thus faith has two poles, one ‘objective’ and ‘external’ and the other ‘subjective’ and ‘internal’: grace and intellection.

“Revelation...has the power to actualize the intelligence which has been darkened, but not abolished, by man’s fall.”

A definition of the potential mystic follows from this:

“The darkening of the intelligence may be only accidental, not fundamental, and in such a case the intelligence is in principle destined for gnosis.”

If man is “endowed with an intelligence capable of conceiving the Absolute and with a will capable of choosing what leads to the Absolute,” the act of “choosing” is in its highest sense nothing less than concentration on the Absolute. Therefore, in giving a very general definition of the Way, the author speaks of it as “doctrine and method, or metaphysical truth accompanied by contemplative concentration.” He adds: “Metaphysical truth is discrimination between the Real and the unreal or ‘less real’; and concentration or the operative act of the spirit—prayer in its very widest sense—is in a way our response to the truth which offers itself to us; it is Revelation entering into our consciousness and becoming in some degree assimilated by our being.”

This chapter develops the conception of Islam as a path of Knowledge and of Christianity as a path of Love, and shows how the two ways ultimately converge. There is also a passage on symbolism which contains, amongst other things, an illuminating comparison between virgin nature and masterpieces of art as regards their respective influences upon man and their respective values to him as supports upon the spiritual path.

To explain “why Moslems believe in Islam” necessarily means explaining, if only indirectly, why they are so remarkably unconvertible to other religions, and how it was possible that Islam should have spread, as it did, in so short a space of time over so wide a surface of the globe. This book certainly gives the key to these questions, but the author never writes at the expense of other religions. In confronting us with one particular religion as an entirely self-sufficient plenitude he makes us sharply conscious of other equally valid religions in the background, and of the necessity for these other religions, and of the One Truth to which they all lead.

A Christian missionary recently wrote: “The rise of Islam will always be a painful puzzle to the Christian mind.” Frithjof Schuon may not have read this remark, but his book serves as an overwhelming answer to it; and at the same time *Understanding Islam* leaves us with more than

a suspicion that the author's conception of Christianity is far more profound and far more glorious than that of the missionary in question.