

# OPINION

## Islam: The Battle within

**Muhammad Maroof Shah\***

A solution that once came to their rescue could be tried today as well. It is heeding the best minds who know both tradition and modernity intimately.

Should we teach or not teach evolution to children in schools? Should traditional philosophy and some exposure to modern philosophy be allowed/encouraged or discouraged in our schools? Should all major schools of *ilm-ul-kalam* be taught along with the cutting edge debates on a host of issues we hardly imagine as part of public discourse? Should the meaning of Islamic art or art in general form integral part of curriculum for all? Should traditional Muslim view of Caliphate/Imamate, modern political Islam, democracy, new interpretations from new approaches to religions, social and natural sciences that avoid

mentioning or taking sides on God as their methodological principle, world religions including archaic wisdom, traditions and dozens of theological and philosophical schools that have developed in the history of Islamicate world be taught to students? Should we allow free discussion of such issues in classes as class/gender/ideology and how they inform our reading of canon? Should Islam or Islamic studies be taught to children? If yes then what are the texts besides the Quran and Hadith (both Sunni and Shia canon) in Kalam, in philosophy, in logic, in hermeneutics, in Quran exegesis both traditional and modern that should be taught to all? How come we teach *ilm-ul-kalam* today without properly knowing modern critics of theology or newer theological developments? Which of the traditional Islamic sciences that

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included some sciences that are taboo today be included in curriculum? Should Sufism be taught as its Masters presented it or as we frame it in certain ideological terms? What about things like Islamic/Muslim feminism or the academic studies of fundamentalism or such debates as Islam in the singular and plural or what is Islam raised by our modern scholars trained in both traditional and modern settings? What about those who claim to have copyright on teaching Islam but don't allow proper engagement with primary sources (Intellect, reason, hikmah and many sciences such as history) for understanding primary sources (texts of Quran and Prophetic traditions)? How come such naivety in asserting we don't interpret but take first hand truth unmediated from the sources? What about those who wish to impose their interpretation without allowing one to ask how come that interpretation or selective hermeneutic itself was chosen as the standard one in highly charged atmosphere of political and theological rivalry? Should we teach truth and thus certain open ended inquiry or packaged truth for others (of our theological/juristic school) and claim it is the truth? All these questions are live and important and mostly ignored in the Muslim world. And hence the crisis of two types of education in universities and

madrasahs, political battles for/against "Islam," accusations and counter-accusations of heresy and overt and covert threats of violence for one's argued position, and the plague of taking inferior minds seriously as the best minds/sages aren't heeded. Is there a way out?

A solution that once came to their rescue could be tried today as well. It is heeding the best minds who know both tradition and modernity intimately. Our tragedy is that those who claim to know tradition or classical Islam in its original formulations stop at certain interpretation claimed to be the interpretation; they are trapped in juristic or theological approaches and certain simplistic view of history and language. They can't explain to themselves such foundational elements as what is knowledge and how it saves or what is *ihsan* when applied to arts or how come we are asked to witness God's unity when we don't know it first hand or care to distinguish Muslim from Mu'min or Islam as metaphysical and existential state that all humans necessarily could bear witness to Islam as expressed in certain contingent historical formulations or explain how come salvation is linked to grace or *fazl* and not actions necessarily or primarily and how we can show

today that guides have been sent to all communities (including thousands of tribal communities, far off isolated places in China, in Africa, in polar regions etc.) who don't know Book/Prophet centric religion as we know and some of whom can't be ordinarily approached by any *tableegi* mission of any religion as they strongly resist strangers that might be deputed to convert them. In the traditional camp, it is the great traditional authorities such as Hazrat Jafar Sadiq, Abu Hanifa, Razi, Ghazzali, Ibn Taymiyyah, Shah Waliullah, Anwar Shah Kashmiri, Alama Tabatab'ī and others (all of them adopted/adapted what can be characterized as academic/intellectual/theo-philosophical approaches as against sermonizing polemical ideological one of more popular preachers/scholars) and sages (as distinguished from mere ratiocinative philosophers) like Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra who undertook almost comprehensive review of almost all traditional sciences and their great breadth of engagement saved Muslims from both complacent and defeatist mindsets. For understanding contemporary condition intimately one can't bypass serious engagement with such thinkers as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, Foucault etc. and many exponents of a number of human and natural sciences. Regarding the

encounter of tradition and modernity, within the Ulema camp, we can learn something from the likes of Manazir Ahsan Gilani (the author of much ignored modern classic of Muslim theology *Ad-Deen-ul-Qayyim* and translator of Mulla Sadra's *Asfar*) and Murtaza Mutahhari. When experts of both the camps meet (as contemplated in joint work of Anwar Shah Kashmiri and Iqbal) or when extraordinary scholars who combine in themselves both these backgrounds – one quickly recalls some examples from Iran or originally trained in Iran – we can expect some great results. It is *Urafa/Sages* who deserve to be heard most earnestly on the question of *reconstruction of theological thought as they are best capable of facing the challenge of tajdeed-i-deen in the age dominated by philosophers*. It is rare, very rare to find such nuanced and careful engagement with intellectual tradition of Islam in marketplace, in seminaries, in universities that we can indeed mourn about *qaht-ur-rijal* (famine). We have great scholars in diverse fields but they can be, often, ridiculously misinformed or biased regarding other fields or what is called the other in one's intellectual tradition. And Islam which connotes submission to truth, to whole truth and pursuit of perfection in every discipline that is not alien to being human (*ihsan*) is hard to come by in

all its richness and comprehensiveness (we find elaborate lists of exclusions in most of the scholars we can name in the name of so-called pure Islam). What we find mostly is some fragments or ideologically filtered versions. Although the core of Islamic tradition is quite accessible today what is worrisome is that most people fail to locate where and pay heed to school teachers, “professors” polemicists, mere jurists/exoteric scholars. There are self styled Islamists who are ignorant about arts, Ulema who never assimilated texts of *hikmah*/logic in their curriculum and fiery preachers who treat every other theological/philosophical/mystical school of different persuasion as an *other*. Neither universities nor madrassahas have vibrant cross disciplinary spaces

where Ulema and modern scholars could meet. Nudwa originally conceived as facilitating such a space was almost aborted in the very inception and Shibli like people have been on margin ever since. Can we imagine today Prof. Jamal Khawja in conversation with top Deoband Ulama or Arkoun presenting a paper in a conference in Azhar or Fazlur Rahman giving extension lecture on annual conference of JEl or head of great seminary addressing annual philosophy or social science congress? Where are those prepared to learn and thus engage in proper dialogue with the other? If most of Muslims think they already have all the answers and thus needn't think or learn or engage in a proper dialogue as Adonis notes, what can one do? ■

[Courtesy: *Greater Kashmir*]