

Book Review

Syed Shabbar Zaidi, Faith and Intellect: A Semi-Secular Discourse on Socio Political issues and Divine Revelation, Karachi, Law House, 2022

We have here an accountant write on accountability. Faith and its relation to Intellect is a perennial theme. From the days of Plotinus onwards there has been an effort to bring about harmony between Belief and Philosophy. Muslim philosophy began as commentaries on Greek philosophy, so the first manifestation was political.

The Caliphate began as a republican office, but soon became imperial. The struggle in the Middle East was between competing caliphates, while in Europe the struggle was between Empire and Papacy. The term secular derives from this conflict. Revenue records classified Church and Secular land separately. Thus, secularism stands for what Syed Shabbar Zaidi has had to call semi-secular. Since semi-secular also implies semi-religious, it means that Shabbar Zaidi finds the term secular inadequate.

In Islamic lands there are different revenue rates Kharaj for non-Muslims and Ushr for Muslims. Strictly speaking then, secular in the context of Islam is like speaking of goal posts in a cricket match. In Islam a mosque cannot be built on illegally or forcibly acquired land. Secularism, then does not denote the irreligious, but divides worship from other human activities. Ritually those acts requiring ablution and those not. In Islam we have the rights of God and the rights of worshippers. In punitive terms if a creature injures another creature, God will not forgive the errant creature unless the injured worshipper forgives,

Thus, we have Rights of God and Rights of Worshippers and it is the latter which is now called Human Rights.. Now as to Shabbar Zaidi's view on religion:

“Religion is there to provide peace of mind, body, soul and self and not to confuse people and create turmoil...the utopia of an ideal state after

11Hijri is essentially a step to usurp power in the name of the divine. I do not believe in any concept of an Islamic state.” (p14)

To avoid misunderstanding the author, we need to keep before us his basic premise: “The ultimate accountability is for an individual, not for the community.” P, XIII. Keep aside the people who slaughtered Swaleh’s camel. Between Faith and Intellect there are diverse topics through which the author guides us, the polity the economy, the society thereafter a brief but updated history of Pakistan.

What surfaces from Shabbar Zaidi’s travails is that a polity in Islam is not prescriptive. Monarchy is deprecated, but as the example of Prophet Solomon shows, it is not forbidden. Consultation is recommended in Islam, but neither a presidential, nor a parliamentary system is decreed. We can go further. The Holy Quran (4:92) expounding upon manslaughter, makes the following command: “It is not for a believer to kill a believer except by mistake. He who had killed by mistake must set free a believing slave and pay the blood money to the family of the slain, unless they remit it as charity. If he be of a nation/ community (*qaum*) hostile unto you, and he is a believer, then (the penance) is to set free a believing slave. And if he cometh of a people between whom and you is a covenant then the blood money be paid unto his people and a believing slave must be set free. And who hath not the wherewithal must fast for two consecutive months. A penance from God. God is the Knower, wise”

This elaborate verse says that believers can belong to two different nations, even those hostile unto one another, or distinct enough to require a covenant. Thus, nation states in Islam are not an anomaly. This means that Syed Shabbar Zaidi faces the correct direction; but he goes on to argue:

“Our religion teaches us the separation of state and religion. The Agreement which the Holy Prophet PBUH entered with peoples of other faiths in Madina is a clear manifestation of the manner of rule which the Holt Prophet PBUH desired...This separation with general guidelines in various relevant socio-economic aspects of society is the subject matter of this book”.p.9

The Charter of Madina is ecumenical, it is true, it respects the faiths of the other signatories, but it does not separate religion from the state as the following articles demonstrates

13. No believer will help an unbeliever against a believer 24. The Believers (because they fear Allah) are better I in showing steadfastness, and as a result receive guidance from Allah in this respect. Others must also aspire to come up to the same standard of steadfastness.25. Enemy property must be surrendered to the state.

These articles, as translated by the author himself are sufficient to show that the Charter of Madina was not a manual of local governance. Shabbar Zaidi's interpretation of the Charter of Madina leads him to conclude: "There is no need to have a war with a *de facto* ruler, as long as there is no claim for *de jure* rights. Such a situation is hypothetical since all the Umayyad rulers styled themselves as *Khalifat ullah*, the Deputy of God, not even the Deputy of the Prophet PBUH. Yazid I called Abdullah bin Zubair not a rebel but an atheist!

Next, Shabbar Zaidi comments on the evolution of Muslim Theology:

"The first generation of Muslims received knowledge directly from the Prophet PBUH, but they did not compile all that was from the Prophet PBUH. Thus, they did not know between general and specific and between *nasikh* (promulgated) and *mansukh* (abrogated) the subjects were only compiled during the second. Then they memorized all that was compiled. In spite of that, they were not adequate in understanding the subjects. The matter was only compiled by the third generation."p.11

This account leads us to the suspicion that the Revisionist history of Islam has entered Muslim discourse. Compare Syed Shabbar Zaidi's observation with that of Patricia Crone:

"The unreality arises from the fact that what the Sources would have us believe cannot be true; new religions do not spring fully-fledged from the heads of Prophets"

(Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge, 1980, p.12)

Syed Shabbar Zaidi seems unaware of the Revisionist History of Islam, with us since 1977. This labours to establish that Islam took its present shape in the third generation. From this their propagators imply that that Aramaic and not 'Arabic was not the original language of the Quran or Qureish. The present Codex of the Quran was compiled in the Abbasid Era; even that the 'Arabs were pagans when they conquered the Middle East and retrospectively concocted a religion called Islam to distinguish themselves from their Jewish and Christian subjects. All the above is

outrageous, all the above has been challenged, but still continues to hold sway in Western academia.

By attributing culmination to the third generation, Syed Shabbar Zaidi is likewise turning Islamic History around. He does find partial support in Q.47:16 “And some of them give ear to thee, till, when they go forth they say to one who has been given knowledge ‘What said he just now!’ this means that all that was said did not register, but the same verse refers to people with knowledge. Ahadith were diffused despite the discouragement of the second Caliph. During the Civil War that broke out within the first and second generations of Muslims, the combatants predicated their stance on scripture. Zaidi goes on to say: “the objective of his migration was not to establish a state. It was the character and conduct of the Holy Prophet PBUH that people voluntarily decided to make him an executive head’...was agreed on as a civic leader. Not a ruler like a king.”p.120

There is some confusion here. Firstly, it was because of the vendetta between the Aus and Khazraj tribes which were decimating each other that the Holy Prophet PBUH was invited to Yathrib (now Madina) to have an impartial arbitrator. Second the tribal society of ‘Arabia considered monarchy as pretentious. Thus, while the Community of Madina was not a kingdom, is clear, but that it was not a polity is not.

It is when Shabbar Zaidi enters the domain of Economics that he comes into his own, his element, but here too we encounter a caveat:

It is absolutely wrong to assume that Islam introduced any new code for the relevant economic subjects. Islam corrected exploitation that had erupted by abuse of power. P.34

Islam did not introduce the law of comparative advantage, nor did the law of diminishing returns, but, neither do the Byzantines and the Sassanids. The means by which Islam corrected exploitation was a code. We find in the Holy Quran this repeated exhortation: “Offer prayers and pay alms.” Rates were fixed for charity or donation depending on the denomination of the donor. While the faith may not have aimed at producing an Islamic state, it unmistakably aims at producing an Islamic society.

Syed Shabbar Zaidi is right when he says zakat is not tax. Zakat is for alleviating poverty not for building roads and dams (p68) Islamic society is to be built on economic principles, which are more clearly delineated

than political principles. It is in economy that Islam is prescriptive. Usury, gambling, hoarding, cheating in weights and measures are strictly forbidden. A welfare state as Zaidi envisages it must perforce derive from economic and not political edicts.

The discussion on economy is the longest and most rewarding part of the book. The part on “Khums” one fifth ----needs some clarification. *Ghanimtum* translated as You Acquire. Normally it is limited only to the spoils of war, but Shabbar Zaidi finds support from the sura on Abu Lahab Q:111: 2 His wealth and gains will not exempt him. *Ma aghna anho*. Here the spoils of war is not in the context and acquisition as such is meant.

Now we come to the history of Pakistan; brief but updated. Unfortunately, Zaidi rides rough shod over it. Take the partition riots. They were caused by the partition of the provinces which was a Congress and not a Muslim League demand. He would have done better to rely on Ian Talbot than Ishtiaq Ahmed in maintaining that the riots were started in Amritsar, by Hindus (*Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1988, p.101)

About the 1965 war, Shabbar Zaidi says: “Controversially the East Pakistan Army did not interfere in the conflict and this caused anger in West Pakistan against East Pakistan.” P191. I wonder who told him that. There was no separate East Pakistan Army. Pakistan Army personnel were posted there by rotation. I was a student of Dacca University then and daily fiery demonstrations took place, not only against India, but also against the United Nations (*jati punjo*) There was Indian bombing of East Pakistan cities and some friction on the border, but the battles were fought mainly in the West because it was over Kashmir

That Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had said *Idhar Hum, Udhar Tum* is repeated without scrutiny. These words were put into Bhutto’s mouth by Abbas At’har editor of *Azad*, Lahore, 15 February 1971. The sub-heading even here was that “Pakistan shall stay united”

Finally we come to Intellect. This is an integral part of the Islamic Faith.: “Lo We have revealed an ‘Arabic Quran so that you may use your intelligence. *La’ allukum ta’qiloon*’(Q12:2)...W have appointed it a Quran in ‘Arabic that haply ye may think” *La’ allakum ta’qiloon* (Q 63:3)He hath set uncleanness upon those who do not use their intellect *Wa yaja’al ur Rijsa alal lazeena la ya’qiloon* (Q10: 100)

Syed Shabbar Zaidi is an accomplished scholar, a legendary figure in the world of finance, but he has covered a very large area here. The upshot is that we are left with a qualified audit, whatever meaning you wish to give it.

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