BOOK REVIEWS

Chandra Muzaffar, Exploring Religion in Our Time

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Tengku Ahmad Hazri International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia

The cliché is now almost ubiquitous, that religion is back on stage and is now defining the shape of the public sphere. If the West once heralded the Promethean revolt against Heaven, it is now acknowledging that religion is a force to be reckoned with, insofar as it is now recognised that the secular and loss of the transcendent from the vision of humanity has been responsible for many of humanity's catastrophes today.

Religion's public role is of course not new. The world's religions have each brought to the fore their own perspectives in global affairs. Weaving these strands together has been the signature and trademark of Malaysian public intellectual, Chandra Muzaffar, since the 1970s. His vision, like that of the organisation that he founded and now leads, the Malaysia-based International Movement for a Just World (JUST), is to return to the spiritual and moral worldview found in religion as the compass to navigate our public life. Chandra maintains that religion offers a solid basis to look for answers, for indeed the ultimate causes of our present predicament are brought about by "those traits in the human being and in society that are antithetical to the spiritual and moral perspectives found in religious thought" (p. 74).

In his most recent work, *Exploring Religion in Our Time*, Chandra examines the role that religion can play in the context of a post-secular world with its comeback from the long exile. The four chapters – "Religion in Asia"; "Religion as Protest; Religion in Power"; "Religion and Identity in a Globalising World"; and "The Role of Religion in Overcoming Contemporary Global Challenges" – explore how religions may articulate a universalist framework and forge a spiritually and morally inspired alliance towards a just civilisation. Sure enough, in Asia, religion has always been a central part of people's lives, but there have been anomalies (such as colonialism and secularisation of society) which made the contemporary picture somewhat different from the past. It is because of these that "no mainstream religious leader from any of the major faiths was able to anticipate any of the great crises facing humanity today" (p. 84). This renders the resurgence of religion a significant event, not just for the West, but also for Asians. Historically, religions have been on

BOOK REVIEWS 567

both camps: in power and in protest or critique against the powers-that-be. In the modern world, religions' track record in the latter case is hardly flattering as seen, for example, in the influence of Hindutva ideology in Indian politics (pp. 5–7), with its adhesion to Hindu chauvinism and attacks on Muslim minorities.

Such religious exclusivism is at odds with global religious resurgence that now demands religious communities to foster greater interfaith cooperation, yet it is constantly intensified by a plethora of factors, such as identity politics. In answering the question of what religion means to people, Chandra's first answer is identity (p. 1). Yet he concedes on its complexity (pp. 60–2) while calling for a universal and inclusive identity. His major complaint is when identity becomes exclusive. Identity, he explains, is the reason behind preoccupation with nomenclature, symbols and forms over substance. The author's definition of identity (p. 46) situates it in a social context. Is religion's public role then significant only in relation to 'the other'? Of course, interfaith cooperation towards social transformation is more constructive than doctrinal debates on matters of creed (p. 66). Nevertheless, theology does hold some prospects for meaningful interfaith engagement as our learned author acknowledges when he credits Islamic theology for securing a harmonious revelation-reason synthesis that safeguards Muslim civilisation from secularisation when it developed scientific thought (a fate which, however, was to befall the Christian West later on) (p. 78). This is in fact how the uniqueness or 'particularities' of each religion may serve to complement one another.

It is in this sense that one sees a convergence between *theoria* and *praxis* in the author's narrative on the role of religion in a globalising world. To effectuate a transformation of consciousness towards a universal and inclusive approach demands that three fundamental features of religions emerge strongly, namely faith in Transcendent Reality; recognition of absolute, transcendent values and self-transformation. These can be achieved through mass education that highlights the deeper meanings of religious practices (one can think of Ali Shariati's work on the Hajj as an example) (pp. 86–7). Such transformation is pivotal since many of the obstacles to interfaith harmony that thwart any prospect for cooperation are in reality deep-seated prejudices embedded in the collective and individual psyche. Naturally it is these root causes that have to be addressed, which often require the discursive and theological tools within the religion itself. The author recalls his own experience as a member of the committee set up by the Malaysian Attorney-General in 2006 which reveals the difficulty of dialogue on controversial issues when prejudice and dogmatism hold sway (p. 67).

On a more global scale, the author applies empirical diagnoses to contemporary conflicts and crises – addressing mainly the fuel, food, financial, environmental and nuclear crises – yet ultimately, he notes that they have profound spiritual causes. Thus greed and the denigration of justice explain the fuel crisis, self-centredness

is responsible for the environmental crisis, and the desire to dominate and lack of trust brought about the nuclear crisis (pp. 73–5). By the same token, there are also practical socio-political reasons behind what appear to be "religious" conflicts: hence the Israeli–Palestinian conflict pertains to usurpation and annexation of land, the Hindu–Muslim conflict in Kashmir is about occupation and territory, the Sinhalese conflict is linked to political rights and independence (pp. 58–9). Such analyses give an insight into the complexity and organic inter-relationship between the spiritual and the empirical rarely appreciated in discourses on socio-political affairs – a rich theme in itself yet one that would have been beyond the scope of the book, although the author's struggle to explore their dynamism and tension can be readily discerned in these pages.

Dr Chandra here is critical of hegemony and the elite who abused their position for their own gains, yet he does not dismiss their role altogether. The religious elite especially, has an important role to shape public opinion, but for that, "the influential stratum of society should acquire in-depth knowledge and understanding of not only the similarities and differences among the various religions, but also their underlying values and principles" (p. 62). At the popular level, all elements of society have to be mobilised towards this task, involving the state, civil society, educational institutions and the family. The latter especially, must continue their role as the means "through which values such as respect for cultural and religious diversity and the accommodation of the other [are] transmitted" (p. 88). The primary role of the state would be to create an atmosphere that will allow good values to flourish (p. 41). Indeed, the state itself, like the model exemplified by the Medina Charter, should be one based on shared values (p. 39).

The book hints at many promising themes and issues that appear as call-to-action. Yet to fully empathise with the author's intent, it is crucial to appreciate that his discourse is ultimately a spiritual one that demands patient and sustained struggle, both in society and within oneself.

Mohamed Ajmal Abdul Razak (ed.), Islam Hadhari: Bridging Tradition and Modernity

(Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2009), viii+332 pp. ISBN: 978-983-9379-50-1 (hardback).

Norhayati Mustapha International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia

As a manner of introduction, the editor of the book under review gives the background to *Islam Hadhari* or Civilisational Islam, essentially a comprehensive