Book Reviews

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Living the Qur’an in our Times, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2012.

Qur’anic hermeneutics is one of the ever developing and cherished traditions in Islam. Muslims devoted their intellectual energies to understand the very will of the God via tafsir science. It is quite interesting to see the hermeneutical diversity in the Qur’anic discourse, and history bear witness that no other book has received such a serious intellectual attention. There is no denying of the fact that works of al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Razi (d. 1209) and al-Zamakshari (d. 1144) serve as source books in the tafsir field but that should not lead one to think that modern exegetes are travelling the beaten path. We do have the likes of ‘Abduh (1849-1905), ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Farahi (1863-1930), Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) etc, who added lustre to the ever-growing Qur’anic discourse. The book under review should be taken as an addition to this living discourse.

The book begins with preface which sums up succinctly “who should read the work and why”. According to the author, the book is addressed to all those who yearn to live in diversity. The author calls for the “distillation process" of religious thinking, thereby focusing on the core of religion while doing away with the influence of the time or to borrow author’s phrase – “cultural paddings” (p. xii). This distillation process is further expanded upon in the introduction of the book under review. As per the author, the modus operandi for it is to distinguish between the “intrinsic values" (Basic Values like love, justice, tolerance, generosity and the like) from the “instrumental values" (ways towards the attainment of the Basic Values). The author criticizes the hermeneutics of of al-Tabari, al-Ghazali (d. 1111), saying, “this approach never trickled down to reach the vast majority of the faithful. Quranic studies gradually ossified into a rigid and isolated discipline…” (p. xx). Author does not substantiate this sweeping remark and because of this any innocent reader could harbour a fallacious view about the Traditional Qur’anic/exegetical discourse which is replete with hermeneutical plurality.

Chapter One ‘Perennial Islam: A Qur’an Based Paradigm’ endeavours to built up the Qur’ân-oriented world which, as per the author, respects plurality
of identities. The thrust of the first chapter is on “Intrinsic” values. The underpinnings of the chapter are how to translate “Intrinsic” values into action while having a reflective adherence to the Qurʾān. Terming religions (Religions, as per author, are different forms of Perennial truths) as different cultural fruits (p. 7), author writes about spiritual pluralism and diversity, and at the same time criticizes Muslims for frowning at such ideals. While explaining his understanding of perennial Islam, author qualifies the *shariʿah* with an adjective *Static*, and hence leaving the impression that *shariʿah* is stagnant and here again the view is not substantiated. It seems that author has same negative approach toward hadith as he declares them as “not sufficiently authentic,” (p. 5) and it is here that one can gauge the underpinnings of chapter title wherein word the “Hadith” is missing. Traditional Muslims take on the Qurʾān and hadith as twins is thereby questioned. Amazingly, the author has not mentioned any exegetical work in the very first serious chapter of the book.

Chapter 2 discusses the Qurʾān as a revealed book, and comments upon the nature of revelation, structure of the Qurʾān and its composition. Regarding the nature of revelation author says that exact nature of first revelatory experience and the revelation itself cannot be comprehended. As far the structure of the Qurʾān is concerned author refrains from calling the Qurʾān as a Book but prefers calling it as “the Speech of Allah” because, as per author, the word *book* raises some expectations that are not fulfilled. Furthermore, author gives a brief sketch about history of collection of the Qurʾān and presents different views about the current arrangement of Qur’anic *surahs*. Author opines that diversity of opinions about the arrangement of the *surahs* does not affect the [very] core of the Islamic faith i.e. divinity and authenticity of the Text.

Chapter 3 deals with some basic aspects of the semantics of the Qurʾān, wherein the author touches upon different linguistic moods of the Qur’anic units like narrative, prescriptive, ethical, metaphorical, etc. Author also discusses “Mystique of the Qurʾān” and puts forward seven points like *Muqattat*, which, to him, are cause of intellectual uneasiness. Here again, Jamal Khwaja does not take pains to see the traditional exegetical discourse on such issues.

Chapter 4 covers the vision of the Qurʾān. At the outset, Khwaja comments on the core of the Qur’anic vision, and then aptly starts with God, divine attributes, prophethood and status of creation in relation to the divinity. Moreover, the concept of unity of humankind and a common “Din” has been discussed.

Chapter 5 focuses on the spirit of the Qurʾān. Author opines that apparent skeleton of the Qur’anic injunctions (which, as per him are “situation specific” p.79) should not blur the core of the Qur’anic piety. Furthermore, author expli-