



The Genesis of Change

Few Muslim scholars have systematically examined Islamic and Western thought and delineated the interfaces and boundaries of each. **M Iqbal Asaria** reviews two studies which with erudition and competence attempt this task.

IN the early fifties in Iran and the early sixties in Iraq it seemed for a time that the communists were about to triumph. The Tudeh Party's influence during Mossadegh's government and the communists' sway over Abdul Karim Qassim raised the spectre of communism in Muslim countries. These 'near-misses' had a traumatic impact on the religious scholars in the region, and led to determined efforts to refute historical materialism on the one hand and proffer Islamic alternatives to contemporary problems on the other. Two scholars, both sadly martyred in their prime - Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr and Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari - excelled in this task and continue to have a profound impact on a large cross-section of Muslims - both *Ulama* and laymen. Their works have also done the painstaking groundwork necessary for the flourishing of movements seeking a contemporary implementation of Islam.

The two studies under review - *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought* and *Social and Historical Change* - are English translations of Mutahhari's works. The *Fundamentals* is akin to an anthology designed to acquaint the reader with the Ayatullah's work on a variety of subjects which formed the basis of his thought on the world-view of Islam. It also contains a valuable biographical sketch of the author by Professor Hamid Algar

Social and Historical Change on the other hand has been available in a different translation under the title *Society and History* published by Sazman-e-Tablighat-e-Islami, Iran, since early 1985. This is one of the unfinished manuscripts of Mutahhari and as such the history part ends most abruptly.

Ayatullah Mutahhari, himself was an exceptional individual. One of the leading students of Imam Khumayni, Mutahhari was equally at home in the *Hausa* of Qom and the Faculty of Divinity at Tehran University. By sheer dint of application, Mutahhari,

Fundamentals of Islamic Thought, by Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, (tr. by R Cambell with annotations and an introduction by Hamid Algar) Mizan Press, Berkeley, California, 1985, 235pp.

Social and Historical Change, by Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, (tr. by Hamid Algar), Mizan Press, Berkeley, California, 1986, 164 pp



Ayatullah Mutahhari: continues to have a profound impact

the *Talub* had mastered secular philosophy as well and once petty jealousies from mediocre colleagues at Tehran University were overcome he became the model of a new kind of intellectual in Iran. As Hamid Algar says in his introduction to *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought* the presence of a figure such as Mutahhari in the secular university was significant and effective. Many men of *Madrassa* background had come to teach in the universities, and they were often of great erudition. However, almost

without exception they had discarded an Islamic world-view altogether with their turbans and cloaks. Mutahhari, by contrast, came to the university as an articulate and convinced exponent of Islamic science and wisdom, almost as an envoy of the religious institution to the secularly educated. Numerous people responded to him as the pedagogical powers he had first displayed in Qom now fully unfolded.

His works reflect this breadth of vision and experience. The style is most engaging. On any subject, Mutahhari first delineates the nature of the subject and sets up the appropriate parameters for discussion. He then summarises the main prevailing viewpoints and examines the consequence, congruences and differences of each. The whole discussion is set up in such a way that by the time he comes to present the Islamic viewpoint, the answers are almost pouring out of the analysis thus far, and only need elaboration for detail.

When one reads the chapter on Philosophy in *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought* for instance, one not only becomes acquainted with the Islamic view on philosophy but also with the links and differences between Greek, Islamic and Western philosophy and with the differing viewpoints on the subject amongst Muslims. At the same time this enormous study in the field enables him to synthesise the contribution of scholars like Ibn Sina, Ghazzali, Sabzavari, Shoravardi and Mulla Sadra and present them as a meaningful whole. It is this ability

which made him a prime mover of the transformation in Iran. As Algar says, '...the clarification of the ideological content of the revolution and its demarcation from opposing or competing schools of thought have necessarily depended on the written word, on the composition of works that expound Islamic doctrine in systematic form, with particular attention to contemporary problems and concerns. In this area, Mutahhari's contribution was unique in its volume and scope'.

But above all where Mutahhari excels, and this is undoubtedly due to his sound grounding in Islam, is in his use of Islam and its norms as a starting point for his deliberations. All others from Greek Philosophy to Western Science, are explained with the aid of the Islamic terms of reference which he expounds with characteristic clarity. This is in sharp contrast to many contemporary Muslim scholars, who tend to 'Islamise' their analysis by eluding to a smattering of Islamic concepts towards the end of their submissions not bothering (or unable) to relate them to their own methodology. Both studies under review demonstrate the great power of this basic transformation in approach, and open enormous vistas of fresh pursuits for generations of Muslim students.

In *Fundamentals...* are collected some of Mutahhari's deliberations on the 'perennial' issues which Muslims have tackled over and over again. Thus the six selections are titled, Man and Faith, The World-view of *Tauhid* Philosophy, Spiritualism, Quranic view of life and *Tauhid* and Evolution.

The freshness of his approach, and the extent of his contemporary awareness can be glimpsed from his discussion of Man and Faith, and particularly by looking at the debate on Faith and Science. Mutahhari sees the two as complementary and begins by analysing and lamenting the 'divorce' of science and faith in Christianity. He attributes this to a wrong concept of 'fallen man'. As he says, 'It is this conception that divides the last fifteen hundred years of European history in the Age of Faith and the Age of Reason and sets faith and science at odds. But the history of Islamic Civilisation is divisible into the Age of Flowering, or the Age of Science and Faith, and the Age of Decline, in which science and faith together have declined'. He then delineates the boundaries of science and faith and shows their crucial complementarity.

Mutahhari comments, 'History shows the consequences of disjoining

science and faith. Where faith has been, and science not, individuals' humanitarian efforts have produced no great effect- at times, no *good* effect. Sometimes they have given rise to fanaticism, stangations, and ruinous conflicts. Human history is filled with such events. Where science has been, with the place of faith left empty, as in some contemporary societies, all the power of science has been expended on selfishness, egoism, acquisitiveness, ambition, exploitation, subjugation, deceit and guile'.

Again his confidence on his own exposition can be gauged from the discussion on man's ability to 'create' a living being. After demonstration that creation is a continuous and ongoing activity rather than a one-off intervention by Divine Will, Mutahhari says, 'Some theists, who see the relation between Life and God's will as restricted to the first appearance of life and other exceptional instances, vehemently deny this possibility (of man making a living being). But in Quranic teachings, there is nothing to prevent it'.

In *Social and Historical Change* Mutahhari adopts a different approach. In the first part, he examines the nature of society from a conceptual standpoint. He believes that society has an *independent* existence as distinct from the sum of individuals who constitute it. As such there are laws pertaining to society *per se*. In this the influence of thinkers like Durkheim and Raymond Aaron is also discernible. Mutahhari comes

close to Durkheim's position of attributing major human actions to the operation of society. The convergence theories of Aaron find an expression in Mutahhari's view that man was bound to gravitate towards his primordial nature (*Fitrah*) and thus converge into a global polity. He says, 'I have discussed concerning the Islamic theory of unity versus plurality identity of societies and concerning the facts that the natural and genetic course of societies is towards a single society and a single culture and central program of Islam is ultimately to establish such a culture and such a society...'.

In the second part devoted to history, Mutahhari gives a masterly exposition of historical materialism, its necessary consequences and how even Marx, Engles, Lenin and Mao violated its logic. He then spends a lot of effort in constructing one of the most solid refutations of historical materialism. Unfortunately, the manuscript ends abruptly, indicating that he was still working on it at the time of his martyrdom. Indeed both parts would have benefitted much from revision and in the *Society* portion by the incorporation of discussion of new theories on the nature and future of societies.

It is to be hoped that more basic works of the author become available in English to enable a larger number of scholars to benefit from the works of this martyred master, (*ustad-i-shahid*) as he has come to be known ■

