

Book Review:

Islam: Faith, Practice and History

By Seyed Muhammad Rizvi

(Ansarian Publications, 2004)

Review by: Sedighe Shakeri*

Abstract: *The book "Islam: Faith, Practice & History" is written by Seyed Muhammad Rizvi in 2004. This book consisting of three main parts "Islamic beliefs, laws and ethics, and history" has been divided into 50 lessons. The writer's aim of compiling the mentioned book is to reply to seekers of truth. He has considered it as a resource, especially for those who have recently submitted to Islam. The Islamic center in Houston, Texas was included it in its tabligh program for new Muslims. Ways of knowing God, the justice of God, prophets and scriptures, Qur'an as the miracle of Islam, The Imamate: succession to the prophet, khilaphat & consultation, the return & resurrection, the Shari'a, Islam's spiritual program, a short biography of the prophet and Imams, and other subjects are the issues discussed in details through the book. The book has been translated into Swahili as well.*

* Master of Science in library and information science of
National Library and Archives of Iran

Book Review

In this article a short explanation about the writer is given followed by introducing propounded issues in the book (with the same order as table of contents of the book). Afterwards some of the structural and content-related qualities of the book will be noticed.

1. About the Writer

The book called "Islam: Faith, Practice & History" is written by Seyed Muhammad Rizvi. He is the son of Seyed Sa'id Akhtar Rizvi who was an Indian-born, Islamic scholar of the Shia and active in promoting Islam in East Africa. He was born in a place called Ushri, Distric Saran Bihar, India, in 1927.

In 1959 Mr.Akhtar Rizvi went to Lindi, Tanzania, where he was appointed the local Islamic scholar. He there learned Kiswahili and improved his English in order to better perform his work as a scholar. His name became synonymous with the word Tabligh (Islamic mission) among the indigenous people of East Africa, and he introduced correspondence courses in Islamic studies in English and Kiswahili besides several other courses for Shia students, some of the courses being taught even outside Africa. Finally, after 43 years living in Tanzania, he died at the age of 76.

He spent all his life on researching, writing and advertising. He has more than 140 books in English and Swahili. Among them, he has so many works about knowing Islam as there are many citations to them all over the book. Some of them are: *the Need for religion, The roots of religion, God of Islam, The Qur'an & hadith, Imamate(The vicegerency of the prophet),*

the family life in Islam, the importance of Hijab, Slavery (Islamic and western perspectives), Prophecies of the holy prophet of Islam, Reciprocal rights, Life of Muhammad the prophet, The justice of God, Pork, Wahhabis fitnah exposed, and etc.

Mr. Seyed Muhammad Rizvi is a Shia scholar and possesses valuable works about different fields and aspects of Islam. Some of them are:

The ritual and spiritual purity, Shiism: Imamate and Wilayat, Writing an Islamic will, Khums: an Islamic tax, an introduction to the Islamic Shari'ah.

Most of them are written in English and Swahili. Among them, there are some which have been translated into other languages as Farsi and Arabic.

2. A Brief Description of the Book

2.1 General Structure of the Book

The book which is an introductory treatise on Islamic beliefs, laws and ethics has been organized by the writer into three main parts consisting of fifty lessons. It seems that it has been compiled for the Islamic Education and Information Centre, Toronto in Canada.

This book has 389 pages and for the first time, it has been published in 2004. The course consists of three main parts. Each part includes several lessons, which are short between 3 to 10 pages. The sources used in preparing this course have been duly mentioned at the end of each lesson followed by some questions related to the issues. The number of questions between 2 to 7; but generally, most of the lessons consist of 3 questions. Usually, one of the questions makes the reader think deeply about what he/she has learned from that lesson. As an

example, I can refer to the third question in the lesson 19 which is about the return and resurrection. The question is: "explain how the belief in the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment affects the life of a good Muslim. (You may use some real

example from your own life)". Another Example has been chosen from the 35th lesson in which Family Life in Islam has been explained. The question is: "Explain the ways and methods by which you would do silatu r-rahm in today's modern and busy lifestyle of the West".

2.2 A Review of the Contents of the Book

2 .2.1 Part: beliefs

The title of the first part is "beliefs" which consists of 20 lessons. On the whole, quite a few numbers of issues were debated by the writer as follows:

The first lesson begins with this question: why study religion? The writer counts 3 main reasons about God and religion: 1. love of knowing: he reminds us of various questions but emphasizes that the first question which comes to the mind is about our creation i.e. where we have come from and where we will go to. Therefore studying about God and also religion is necessary so as to reply to these questions. 2. The sense of thankfulness: the writer notes some examples of the God power and the intellectual ability of man himself and at last he concludes that we should find the source of this power and offer him our thanks. 3. Preventing possible danger: discussion about existence of the court of great judge and the belief in world after death are referred. Then he states some necessary qualities of religion i.e. "belief follows understanding", and finally in this lesson the religion is

introduced as a complete guidance to develop body, mind, and spirits of human beings as a whole.

In the second lesson, ways of knowing God consisting of the inner way and experiment beyond sensation based on the principle of cause and effect have been clearly and briefly stated by the writer using some examples.

The title of the third lesson is "Design in the universe". The writer explains that the world of existence firmly rests on the foundation of perfect orderliness and that it could never have come to exist on the basis of chance or accident. Then some attributes of God such as his needlessness and omniscience and invisibility of God and finally the basis of God knowledge are discussed in the next lesson.

In Lesson 5 applying the uniform pattern of the universe by one and only God, using some scientific evidences, is proved by the writer.

The title of the sixth lesson is "Tawhid & Sifat". In this lesson, the word "Allah" is meant "one who deserves to be loved" and "in whom everyone seeks refuge" as well. Then the lesson continues by interpreting the message of Tawhid followed by the attributes of God which has been grouped into positive (Sifat Thubutiyah) and negative (Sifat Salbiyah). The former reflects the attributes that exist in Him, whereas the latter reflect the attributes that cannot be found in Him. The eight Sifat Thubutiyah are as follow: al-Qadim, al-Qadir, al-Alim, al-Hayy, al-Morid, al-Modrik, al-Mutakallim, and as-Sadiq. The salbiyah attributes are: as-Sharik, al-Murakkab, al-Makan, al-Hulul, al-Mar'I, and so on; all of them are enumeratively mentioned.

The justice of God is completely and clearly discussed by means of some verses of the Qur'an in the next lesson. The writer believes that injustice stems from ignorance, need,

weakness and compulsion. He proves that none of them can exist in God. Then he defines justice as follows: "justice is that every person's rights should be respected that no distinction should be made between people for no reason". Finally he states that whatever situation happens to man, it is for his spiritual development, and this is the justice of God.

The next lesson refers to the fact that human conscience and intelligence alone are not enough to guide us completely, and to make us achieve the purpose of life which is perfection in all dimensions of life. Thus, there is a need for training. The Divine guidance, God messengers and prophets, as human leaders can help us. Miracle and its role in prophethood are discussed as well.

In the 9th lesson, the writer refers to the fact that prophets are immune from every kind of sin and error, so as to be able to lead mankind towards God without any error or mistake, and this is the meaning of infallibility. Also the writer, in reply to the question "Why must the Prophets be without any faults?", mentions two main reasons which are 1. The principle of instruction and 2. Confidence and acceptance. Then he outlines them in more details. Thus the purpose of sending the prophets was to educate humanity; and we know that in education, the teacher's behavior is really effective. The writer believes that the secret of the prophets' success in their mission was the coordination in their words and deeds. He then says that the greater the degree of faith and confidence that people have in a speaker, the more their agreement with him increases, and vice versa.

In the next stage the writer considers two factors of prophets Infallibility as "Real Love of God" and "The Deep & Perfect Insight of the Prophets".

The great (Ulu 'l-`azm) Prophets and their Scriptures have been discussed in the following lesson.

Lesson 11 starts with talking about Islam, holy Qur'an, and the biography of the holy Prophet of Islam, Muhammad(p.b.u.h). This lesson is about the Arabs in the time of prophet and also prior to Islam, their idol-worshipping and ignorance, and their invitation to Islam. The Prophet's migration to Medina is argued in the lesson too.

Next lesson is devoted to Qur'an as the miracle of Islam. Miracles are to prove the truth of the prophets' claims. In this lesson the differences among all other miracles and the miracle of the prophet- Qur'an- is argued. Also the writer reminds us of The Qur'an as a multi-dimensional miracle. Then its miraculous aspect accompanying with its scientific relations are clearly explained by means of some examples.

The title of lesson 13 is "Muhammad(p.b.u.h), the last prophet" which starts with the explanation of Islam which is the last divine message to mankind, the most complete religion and the culmination of the previous revealed religions. Then "Universality of Islam, The God of Islam, Equality in Islam, Islam and Freedom of Thought, Islam and Knowledge, Islam's Concept of Life, Islamic Laws and Change in Lifestyle" are the categories which are analyzed in more details by the writer. At the end, the Continuation of Divine Assistance has been argued as well.

"The Imāmat : Succession to the Prophet" is the title of the 14th lesson. Introduction of this lesson refers to the death of the prophet and the question of whether there should be anybody who continues the way of the prophet after his death and leads them to the right path in the right way or not. And "Is the Qur'an not Sufficient to lead and guide people?"

The title of the 15th lesson is Amirul Muminin Ali (p.b.u.h): "The Chosen Successor of the Prophet". In this lesson the necessity for a leader in the society is proved and then the Historical Hadīth of Ghadīr, and the Farewell Pilgrimage"(hajjatu 'l-wida') through referring to different verses and hadiths are explained in more details.

Next lesson is about Khilāfat and Consultation (a review of the Saqifah meeting). In the lesson wilayat of the prophet and the question whether the Prophet is subject to "the opinion of the majority" and the story of choosing Abu Bakr as a caliph are debated.

In lesson 17, the Hadith of the holy prophet on "Twelve Imams" is discussed, followed by a short description of the twelve Imams.

The next lesson belongs to Muhammad al-Mahdi(may God accelate his reappearance). A brief biography of Imam Mahdi and also belief in Mahdi in Qu'ran and Sunni Authorities are mentioned In this lesson (you can see more complete information about the biography of Imam Mahdi in the third part of the book)

Lesson 19 is about The Return & Resurrection (Al-Ma'ād and Al-Qiyāmah). The writer has noticed that there are more than a thousand verses of the Qur'an referring especially to the Return and life after death. In the writer's viewpoint, the belief in the Return is a foundation and basis of Islam. Then a few verses from the Qur'an on the Return and Resurrection are mentioned on the necessity of the Return and also on the possibility of the Resurrection. Purgatory (Barzakh), describing the Paradise and Hell in the Qur'an are issues mentioned in the next lesson.

2.2.2 Part 2: Laws and Ethics

The second part of this book, in 15 lessons, talks about laws and ethics.

In the 21st lesson (The Shari‘a) the place of Shari‘a in Islam, and the need for it are noticed by the writer. When giving explanation of the Shari‘a, he introduces it as a complete guidance in all aspects of human life.

Sources of Sharī‘a, such as the holy Qur'an and the Sunnah (practice) of the holy Prophet, are pointed in the next lesson. At the end of this lesson ijtihād, taqlīd, and mujtahid are defined; and in the following lesson the writer extends their meanings and replies to this question: "Is Taqlīd reasonable or not?"

The writer lists the principal meanings (Usūl ad-Dīn)" and doctrines (Furū‘ad-Dīn) of religion and classifies the Sharī‘a laws as well.

The next two lessons are devoted to the Islamic Spiritual program. The writer emphasizes the importance of physical aspect of human being, as well as, their spiritual dimension in Islam. Then he refers to Fasting and Salāt as spiritual programs in Islam. Afterwards, aspects of salāt are explained. To rid our bodies of the physical dirt, we use water; similarly, to rid our souls of the spiritual impurities, we use repentance. In short, the human soul is corruptible. It is corrupted by sins. The corrupted soul can be purified by repentance. These are the issues that are briefly explained in the lesson.

The next three lessons are about the Islamic community. The brotherhood, the equality of believers, promotion of equality and brotherhood among Muslims, recommend good deeds, and prevention from bad behavior, their importance, conditions and levels in Islam have been explained in detail.

The following three lessons are related to the Islamic economic system. Not only Islam guides human being in political, social and moral affairs, but also it considers the financial and economic matters. Then the usage, importance, and qualities of Zakat, Khums, charity, endowment, and... in the Qur'an and history are reviewed by the writer.

The final lessons the second part of the book are concerned about the family life in Islam. In these lessons, the rights of parents and children, and their duties toward each other are given in more details. At last, the importance of attending the relatives in Islam, and the ways of doing it with referring to a tradition of the prophet are emphasized.

Finally, the last lesson of the book is the 50th one, in which guidance in occultation of Mahdi (p.b.u.h) is debated. Then the importance of belief in Imam Mahdi, in the words of Imam Hasan Askari(p.b.u.h)- is discussed. At the end, the views of some opponents of the Shia about Mahdi are responded by the writer. He also talks about the perfect men and considers them as the real followers of Imam Mahdi.

2.2.3 Part 3: history

The third part of the book is about the history of Islam. This part is packed with 15 lessons. The first fourteen lessons describe briefly the biography of Muhammad-the holy prophet of Islam; Fatima Zahra, and 12 Imams from Imam Ali bin Abi Talib to the twelfth one Imam Mahdi. In the beginning of every lesson, in a table, some information such as the name, agnomen, title, father, mother, birth, and death of holy Imam is given.

Then, the lesson follows by a short history of the life of the holy Imam the birth to the death. As an example, we can refer to the 36th lesson "Muhammad- the prophet of Islam" in which

some categories such as birth to Appointment, the beginning of the mission, migration to Medina, the battles, the treaty of Hdaybia, Ghadīr event farewell pilgrimage"(hajjatu 'l-wida'), and his death are observed.

3. Some Characteristics of the Book

3.1. One of the characteristics of this book is the references made to the verses of Qur'an and the words of the holy prophet and ahl-ul-bayt, which are applied mostly in explaining the issues, it not only increases the attractiveness of the book and better understanding of the issues, but also enhances the validity of the book.

3.2. You can see the dialogue method used all over the book. This book is a good reference for replying questions related different aspects of Islam, the history of Islam, and so on. Since the book does not have an index, using it as a reference book is a bit difficult.

3.3. There are some content-related questions at the end of each lesson. This is an appropriate way for the reader's self-examination which is rarely seen in Islamic books.

3.4. The writer's ability in both clarification of the reading matters (wherever he feels that the reader is unable to understand the matter, he clarifies it by using some examples, as in the 7th lesson for explaining the justice of God) and the style of writing the book in plain English is the other characteristic of the book.

3.5. The writer uses a chart and several tables along the book so as to better understanding the mentioned issues. The mentioned chart is in the 27th lesson in page 195. This chart which is a pie one explains the relationship of a Muslim which

is known as Islamic brotherhood. The first two circles show the Muslim's family ties and the third one is based on religious ties (nation). About the tables it is better to say that they are located at the beginning of each lessons of the third part (the history of Islam) of the book, which point to some information such as the name, agnomen, title, father, mother, birth and death of the prophet and 12 Imams.

3.6. When observing the resources cited by the writer in the end of each lesson, it is understood that he has used other books of the same subject in order to compile the book.

3.7. The writer, in his sayings, ratiocinates on the basis of intellectual and although he is observant of Shiism, he has not spitefully spoken. He has respected the beliefs of other religions and faiths, and has never encountered them with a view of aggression and pessimism.