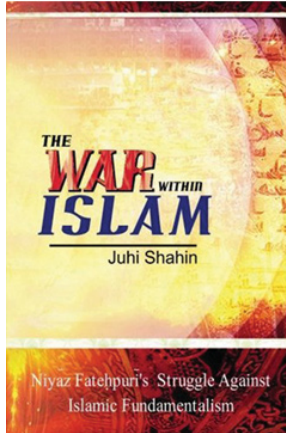


The War within Islam(22 Feb 2011 NewAgeIslam.Com)

Niyaz Fatehpuri's Struggle Against Islamic Fundamentalists  
Book Review by SABIH MOHSIN, South Asia (January 2011)

Title: The War within Islam: Niaz Fatehpuri's struggle against Islamic fundamentalism  
Author: Juhi Shahin  
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In Islam, as in most other religions, religious scholars have tried to interpret their religious tenets in different ways. This has resulted in the coming into existence of various masaliks and even sects. There have been some other religious scholars as well, whose interpretations did command some acceptance for a short while but were forgotten soon after, leaving no permanent impact. Niyaz Fatehpuri was a religious scholar belonging to the second category.

Niyaz Fatehpuri (1884-1966) was educated in Islamic learning under what is generally known as Dars-e-Nizami. He had also acquired the knowledge of English language and literature. He lived in an era during which, under the impact of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's campaign for the acquisition of western education, many questions were being asked about traditional Islam. And the Ulema, traditional scholars of Islam, were faced with harsh criticism.

Niyaz Fatehpuri too, rejected the traditional interpretation of Islam. He was inclined towards a rational interpretation of Islamic thoughts. While doing so he often deviated far from the customary views held by most of the Muslims of South Asia. His only tool for propagating his ideas, which proved to be quite controversial, was his monthly magazine Nigar.

The appreciation received by Niyaz for his innovative views about Islam was at its peak during a short period in the 1930s and 1940s. It was then lost amidst the flurry of the struggle for freedom of India. That struggle was all the more trying for the Muslims of South Asia as they were compelled to demand the partition of the sub-continent as a measure to protect their rights. They were, consequently, made the victims of large scale killings and plundering by the fanatics among the Hindus, the majority community.

Niyaz had neither cared to build up a team of activists to propagate his views nor had he ever thought of providing any institutional support to his ideas, as had been done earlier by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. As such, his efforts to promote his ideas among the Muslims of South Asia who were already passing through turbulent times due to the political situation in the country, just fell flat.

The book under review, War Within Islam, is an attempt to present the essentials of Niyaz Fatehpuri's thinking and to underline its importance, particularly in the context of the present global situation wherein the Islamic Civilization is seen to be in clash with other major civilizations. The author, Juhi Shahin, holds Master's degrees in Islamic Studies from the McGill University of Canada, and also from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. She now happens to be a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at an American University. This book is a revised version of her M.A. thesis at the McGill University.

According to the author, Niyaz believed in the need for a re-interpretation of Islam in the light of the new knowledge that had become available by then. He also advocated and practiced a rational interpretation of Islamic principles. Thus his main targets of criticism were the Ulema whom Niyaz considered to be 'responsible for the stagnation in Muslim religious thinking, and which in turn, was making them suffer in social and economic spheres.'

Giving an example of what Niyaz called 'rational thinking'; the author has quoted the view of Niyaz in relation to the position of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Generally Muslims consider God first in order of importance, followed by the Quran and the Prophet (PBUH) in that order. However, Niyaz assigned the top position to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), then the Quran followed by God. His reasoning for this was the fact that Quran came to us from the mouth of Mohammad (PBUH) and we know about God from these two. A natural corollary of such a concept was the question whether the Quran was a Divine Revelation or was it the work (na'oozo billah) of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) himself?

Here the writer concedes that "This was one of the instances where he (Niyaz) may have taken his logic too far..." And also that such views "clearly would not be acceptable to any ordinary believer." But there were some other views held by him which were not only acceptable to many ordinary believers but were also shared by some distinguished scholars.

Niyaz Fatehpuri believed that most of the ahadis or the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) that have reached us, are fabricated. Similar views are held not only by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan but also by some religious scholars including Syed Sulaiman Nadvi. Niyaz attached great importance to Akhlaq or social behavior. And so did Shibli Naumani and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.

But in spite of his liberal views on many issues, Niyaz was closer to the traditionalist view about women's role in the society. Though he wanted them to be educated in other subjects as well in addition to religious knowledge, he was not in favor of their taking up jobs unless necessitated by difficult family circumstances. The author defends him by saying that it was a rational view dictated by the natural differences between man and woman which assigned a role to the woman within her household.

What is relevant to the present global situation in Niyaz's thinking is that he considered "all humanity to be equal in the eyes of God, no matter which religious practice they pursue." He believed that a reward has been promised by God for those who fulfilled three conditions: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment and righteous conduct. He thus concluded that even those who did not call themselves Muslims, could become capable of receiving God's promised reward. Such beliefs, if made acceptable to the small but more active extremist segments of the global society, can undoubtedly work as an antidote to the current worldwide extremism.

The book includes four appendices in which those themes have been listed which were discussed by Niyaz in his monthly magazine, Nigar, during the various phases of its publication. In Appendix A, themes discussed during the period 1926-1935, have been listed. Appendices B, C and D cover respectively the themes dealt with during the periods 1936-1946, 1947-62 in independent India and 1963-1966 while he lived in Pakistan. An examination of these appendices shows that he had presented and advocated his most controversial ideas about religion during the period 1926-1946. It appears that after the achievement of independence, he had turned his attention to socio-political issues and to history, while innovative ideas on religion had been mostly left aside.

The book The War Within Islam can be bought from Alibris, Amazon, AbeBooks, Biblio.com, Powells as well from publisher Ferozsons online bookstore:  
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