

The War Within Islam: Niyaz Fatehpuri's Struggle Against The Fundamentalists: New Age Islam presents a chapter from Juhi Shahin's book



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CHAPTER 2

Religious Issues

The characteristic of Islam which is not shared by any other religion, and which every thinker has praised, is simply that it

is not just a philosophical idea, but an action: Being a Muslim simply means being a good human being.[i][xi]

Fatehpuri's attempt to write on Islam and to rationalize it had nothing to do with the usual suspects - missionaries' debates, colonial discourse on the topic, or even the views of his contemporaries and predecessors. It was simply because he was interested in both reason and religion. In his own words: "Whenever I used to think (and I used to think often), it was mostly related to reason and religion. Reason because ever since I was a student I had never accepted anything, without satisfying my head and soul. And religion because I was educated in a religious atmosphere and I got the opportunity to study the religious 'ulama'." [xii]

If there was one thread running through all of Fatehpuri's writing, it was his argument with the 'ulama'. They were the ones who inspired him to write on religious issues. And it was to them that he posed his questions, and gave his own answers to what he found questionable in their views. He hardly ever took up a new Western idea and discussed it with regard to Islam, or tried to answer an Islamic question only in the light of Western ideas. However, the whole colonial discourse of Islam being backward and medieval, was familiar to him and he kept trying to dispel this notion by saying that what the 'ulama' were saying and doing was not the only way to look at Islam.

WHAT IS ISLAM?

What is meant by Islam and being a Muslim, can have several interpretations in his opinion. He questioned whether what was practiced in his time was really Islam. Can its believers truly be called Muslims? Fatehpuri's "real" Islam was rational, in consonance with the times and progressive. Fatehpuri stated plainly, "If there is one characteristic of Islam then it is that it moves with the times. You cannot define it in one shape or assign it one meaning. It will keep changing with the time and the progress of man's understanding and reason." [xiii]

Islam took the highest place in Fatehpuri's hierarchy of world religions. He explained how the advent of religions could be seen in phases and how, although one religion came after another, it had always happened that the existing religion was not completely extinguished before the next came, so that, many religions came to exist side-by-side. Islam came in a similar situation. However, what made Islam superior, according to him, was that its vision was much wider. It did not come for a specific time or place but wanted to remain with humanity forever and in the future, to be known as the "complete religion." That, one might think, gave an added responsibility to Islam, or rather Muslims, to explain themselves in every time and place. Islam, if it claimed to be the final and complete religion, should never allow itself to be stagnant since there is no new religion coming to rectify its mistakes. [xiv]

The purpose of Islam was to produce what Fatehpuri called a "spirit of action." This religious spirit of action did not mean just performing ostensibly religious actions like saying one's prayer (nama), but also meant using the resources available on earth for betterment of one's life here, i.e., in this world, in this life and right now. He said that the logic of the 'ulama' - say your nama here (on earth) get houris there (in the hereafter) - did not work for him. [xv] As quoted in the beginning of the chapter, trying to be a good human being, being helpful and kind towards others, and trying to live in harmony with them, is what Islam ultimately desires, according to him; prayer and fasting should lead one on this path.

ISLAM IN HISTORY

Fatehpuri reasoned that the meaning and purpose of Islam had changed over time and that many fallacies had crept into it because the religion of Islam was replaced by the reign of Islam very early in its history. The characteristics of Islam, like its simplicity, its emphasis on right actions and its akhlaq, soon disappeared. The ills of the political regime or government in power filtered into it. He used the analogy of the separation of church and state to explain this - since this never happened in the case of Islam, rulers therefore enjoyed the full opportunity of exploiting religion to suit their personal or political interests.

In spite of this exploitation, though, Fatehpuri believed that, while the Islamic governments persisted, whether they were right or wrong, there was at least an Islamic structure. Once that was gone, Muslims developed an inferiority complex, and completely stopped experimenting with new ideas. It is then, he insists that the right vision of God was destroyed, the meaning of prophethood changed, the belief in right action was sidelined, and Islam became full of traditional mischief and superstition. [xvi]

There had always been changes in the religious thinking and intellectual pursuits of humankind in each new age, according to Fatehpuri. Before Islam, new religions themselves used to appear to rejuvenate the way people thought. If it is to be believed that prophets were sent in all historical periods, then when a particular prophet came, he would have been of that time and would have

addressed the issues confronting the society in which he found himself. Fateh{puri@ believed that even the teachings of the prophets evolved; the prophets must have told people to use idols at an earlier stage, but with the development of human intellect, they began to ask human beings to pray in their hearts. It follows, he maintained, from this reasoning that Muslim thinking should have reached new heights in this new age of progress; instead, it seemed to him, to have gone back to beliefs that Islam originally came to suppress. Instead of worshipping God, Muslims worship tombs and pirs (Sufi masters) and are superstitious.[xvii]

Fateh{puri@ was very clear about who was responsible for a state of affairs in which asking questions is tantamount to unbelief; it was the 'ulama@' . The latter, according to him, had abandoned the Qur'an and embraced only the h{adi@th, believing in them so fervently that if anyone wanted to present an alternative vision of Islam, he was labelled as an unbeliever (mulhid, ka@fir) and excommunicated from the community of Islam. Almost all the modernists in South Asia at the time were campaigning for a return to the original sources, more specifically to the Qur'an, and for less stress on the h{adi@th, to understand how to live in this new age.

Some of the religious issues on which Fateh{puri@ differed from the traditional views are discussed in the following pages:

STATUS OF THE PROPHET

Fateh{puri@ explained that prophethood was defined in either of two ways in religions of the present day: one where the prophet is seen as a reflection of God on earth, or Avatar (as in Hinduism / Christianity) and the other where he is defined as the messenger of God (as in Judaism / Islam). In spite of this difference though, every religion agrees that the prophets came to earth to teach mankind, to tell them the wishes of God and show them the right path.[xviii]

Fateh{puri@ quoted Shibli@@ at length to define Prophethood:

As God has granted different qualities to humankind, so that some people do not possess them and some do in large degrees, in the same way there is a spiritual quality called prophethood, which is related to purity of soul and akhla@@q. The person who has this quality is perfect (ka@mil) in akhla@q and by his influence, other people become perfect. This person is not educated or brought up in such a way as to achieve this quality; rather, this quality is inborn.[xix]

Fateh{puri@ agreed with Shibli@@ on the definition of the concept of prophethood but differed from most Muslims over the priority given to the Prophet. Muslims normally consider God first in order of importance, followed by the Qur'an and Muh{ammad. He, on the other hand, considered Muh{ammad first, then the Qur'an, then God. According to him, Muslims know the Qur'an and God through Muh{ammad, so his actions are to be considered first in themselves.

People want to understand Muh{ammad through the Qur'an and h{adi@th, and I want to verify the Qur'an and h{adi@th through the life of Muh{ammad. People say: Muh{ammad is what the Qur'an says he is; I say that the Qur'an is what Muh{ammad showed through his right actions in his daily life. People follow the Qur'an and Muh{ammad because they fear God, and I want to understand God and the Qur'an through my love for Muh{ammad.[xx]

Prophet Muh{ammad, according to him, was basically a reformer who was very concerned about the state of his society: its illiteracy, ignorance, social evils like polygamy, infanticide, drinking (etc.), its material culture and idol worship. After all, he sat meditating in a cave for weeks even before the advent of the revelation. Fateh{puri@ mused that he must have been thinking about ways to cleanse his society of its ills and it seems, Islam turned out to be a good way of doing so.

Although other modernists also made an effort to humanise the Prophet, not many would have agreed with him that the Prophet had a personal agenda in bringing about Islam. The Prophet might have been concerned about his society, and there must have been a reason why he used to go to that cave, but there is no reason why these two things should be related. Apparently Fateh{puri@ was venturing here into the realm of pure speculation.

Fateh{puri@ asked, "What is the position of the Prophet in Islam? Was he just a messenger, could anybody have become a messenger?" For him the choice of Muh{ammad as the Prophet was crucial. How Muh{ammad acted, how he lived his life, was a topic of primary importance for Fateh{puri. He considered it debatable whether the Qur'an is the speech of God or not, but it was historically proven, according to him, that it did come out of Muh{ammad's mouth.[xxi] His earlier point that the Prophet might have had a reformist agenda of his own in bringing about Islam, and then his insistence that our only certain knowledge is that Qur'an came out of the Prophet's mouth, amounted to placing a question mark on any involvement of God at all. This was one of the instances where he may have taken his logic too far, expressing views that clearly would not be acceptable to any ordinary believer. He appears an agnostic from these views, but seemingly this was not the case. He simply went wherever his logic took him and was not afraid of expressing radically different views.

Given his views that it was of primary importance to understand the Prophet in order to understand Islam, and given his distrust of the h{adi@th, the question arises as to how he wanted to study the Prophet. He was very clear: this could only be done through the Qur'an.

A man's life can be divided into two parts: one is historical and geographical and the other is spiritual and internal. When we study the Prophet's life we realize that, although the first part is completely clear, the second

has been a subject of debate and continues to be so. How was the Prophet personally, what kind of interests nature had bestowed upon him, what were his intellectual capabilities? For knowing all this you do not need to read history books or the *hadi*, because the Qur'an is available. And each and every word of it lets us know how deep his faith was, and how pure his *akhlāq* was. None of the history books were written in the time of the Prophet so they are interpretations of other people in different places and times. Most of the *hadi* are not trustworthy either and can only be believed after thorough investigation. [xxii]

IS THE QUR'AN REALLY GOD'S SPEECH?

As mentioned above, Fateh believed that the only thing that could be proven was that the Qur'an came from Muhammad's mouth; whether it was really God's speech is debatable. The only justification of its divine origin generally given, according to him, was that the grammar, literary quality and style of the *hadi* and the Qur'an differ markedly and therefore, they are speeches of different entities, the Prophet and God. Fateh never found this rationale satisfactory enough to prove such a broad assumption. He agreed that, undoubtedly the Qur'an was truly an extraordinary book in all its aspects and that during that age, nothing like it in either length or quality was produced. However, he argued, it would be going too far to assume that nothing like it could have been produced. Arabic literature and poetry at the time was quite developed, and oral tradition was flourishing. And since Prophet Muhammad was related to the Quraish tribe, which was famous for its oral literature and fluency of expression, it should not be surprising that his language was extraordinarily refined.

Fateh answered the question of the differences in style and quality of the two works by saying that one's language and actions are determined by the emotion one is feeling, and its intensity. He gave the example of poetry. There can be quite a lot of variety in the different verses written by the same poet, some of them perhaps being of a higher literary quality than others. The reason, he thought, was that the poet reached a certain state of mind when he wrote those particular high-quality verses. Those verses that suddenly come into a poet's mind, without any effort on his part, are even in literary circles called *ilhami* or revelatory. [xxiii]

Coming back to the Prophet and the Qur'an, his basic hypothesis was that the Prophet must have reached a certain state of mind, resulting in the revelation (*wahy*). He explained that, unlike his contemporaries, the Prophet was born with an acute discernment of good from evil. A person like him would naturally be upset with the situation in which he found himself. This, according to Fateh, prompted him to get out of his world, hide in caves and think. His deep thinking would lead him into such a state where he would start producing this message. Words burst forth like a spring. The words in that message were obviously his, and in the same language that was widespread during the time and in that area. The only noticeable change was in the style of presentation, which according to Fateh was the result of his state of mind. That is what truly constitutes a revelation, according to Fateh. And this was what made the language of the Qur'an so different from that of *hadi*. [xxiv]

W.C. Smith was clearly not an admirer of Fateh's extreme logic; he did not like the fact that Fateh attacked the very idea of divine revelation. "Accordingly, the Qur'an was seen as a piece of literature, the personal contribution of Muhammad to the thought of the world; all of authority, as well as the ritual and formalism, of the religion was rejected." [xxv]

IS RELIGION FROM GOD OR MAN-MADE?

Fateh believed in God, and there are various instances in his writings to prove that. However, he was not sure if God had anything to do with religion. As seen in the earlier instance, he tried to rationalize even the divine revelation, and showed that it was possible to see the Qur'an as the personal contribution of the Prophet. This was because, for Fateh, religion had a more utilitarian purpose, than spiritual. Religion, for him, was to serve as a guide for humanity, to remind them of doing good deeds, being kind to one another, and remembering God, while taking part in worldly pursuits and aiming for progress and success.

In reality, all religions of the world were made by humans and were not related to God, revelation or providence. The books that are said to be revealed, are the work of human brain only, and therefore, they have different thoughts and teachings according to different time and place. Neither does God need worship and submission, nor does He need anyone's prayers. [xxvi]

Fateh's thesis was that the reasons why some matters have either been forbidden or recommended by religion can be understood by human intellect. Therefore, it is quite possible to say that religious instructions might have been created by human intellect to serve a functional purpose.

Akhlaq of a person is related to this world, and their results are seen here, because of which some have been declared good and others bad. These are not affected by which family you come from, nor is it necessary that they be accounted for in the other world to give reward or punishment. To consider stealing bad, one does not need a revelation, men saw the problems it caused and made God say it. To keep society safe from all crimes that cause humanity, physical, economic or societal problems, is a feeling that is naturally found in every individual, and it was this feeling that told him what is good and what is evil. [xxvii]

RIGHTS OF OTHERS ON ONE

In Islam, according to general understanding, there are two kinds of duties, duty towards God (huqooq Allah) and duty towards fellow human beings (huqooq ul-iba@d). Fateh{puri@ insisted that both of them essentially mean the same thing. Since even the duties that we fulfill towards God (i.e., fulfilling huqooq Allah), make us better human beings, leading in turn to our helping others and becoming more compassionate towards fellow human beings, hence fulfilling our duties towards other human beings better (i.e. fulfilling huqooq ul-iba@d) .

Lets forget about principles of the issue, and get down to brass tacks, and consider what has been classified as Huqooq Allah, and why it is considered so. All religious education is based in two spheres: "Methods of Worship" and "Codes of Behaviour". Let us leave out "Behaviours" because they are related to Huqooq ul-ibad. So that means Haq Allah is related to "Worships", but worship no matter in which form is related to huqooq al-ibad... Even those people who consider nama@z, roza@ and hajj as Haq Allah, would not be able to refuse that these are for our own benefit.[xxviii]

He thus explained his concept:

If we do not follow the injunctions that shariah tells us, it will result in loss for us and our community, and if we do them religiously then we ourselves will benefit from them. That is why all our actions and worship are part of huqooq ul-ibad, and huqooq Allah does not mean anything.[xxix]

H{ADI@TH

Fateh{puri@ believed that the changes in Islam were brought about by the medium of the h{adi@th (plural - ah{adi@th, sayings of the Prophet). He claimed that many of the ah{adi@th were simply fabricated to suit the ruler of the day. The reason why he could simply state such a conclusion, taking it for granted that people would agree with him, was that almost all the modernists - Sayyid Ah{mad Kha@n, Shibli@ Nu'ma@ni@ and even his contemporaries like Muh{ammad Iqbal, the philosopher- poet - were to a greater or lesser degree all doubtful of the ah{adi@th in their entirety and were urging Muslims to be cautious in relying on them.[xxx] Sayyid Ah{mad disapproved of classical h{adi@th criticism since it was based on the characters of the people relating the h{adi@th, and not on rational criticism of the actual text.[xxxi] Shibli@ Nu'ma@ni@ (1857-1914), one of the most prominent intellectuals of that time, and by far the most traditional teacher at the Aligarh school, was also conscious of the need to define h{adi@th and its use. Seventy-five pages of his Si@rat al-Nu'ma@n[xxxii] are written just to demonstrate how cautious and critical Abu@ Hani@fah was in accepting a h{adi@th as true and binding.[xxxiii] Iqbal was responsible for painting the Khila@fah al-Ra@shidah (the period of the first four Caliphs) as a utopia; it was then that "Islam was 'pure', 'socialistic' and simple." [xxxiv] Later, Islam became an empire and all the trappings of power came with it.

REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

On the issue of reward and punishment, people of all religions think that when man does not listen to God's instructions, God gets angry with him, and since the world is the place for learning (da@r al-'ilm), man does not get punished here, but when on the Day of Judgment (qaya@mat) God is the judge, all matters will be presented to Him. And God will give punishment to the wrong-doers for their disobedience, and in the same way, those people who have worshipped and obeyed will be rewarded by Him.[xxxv]

Fateh{puri@ thus expressed commonly-held views on the issue of reward and punishment by quoting Shibli@.

It was the question of Hell that Fateh{puri@ said he really wanted to clarify in his mind. He felt that the way Hell has been prescribed for the wrongs done on earth did not correspond to his overall impression of a merciful and benevolent God. He said that the Bible and Talmud agree with the Qur'an on the description of Hell; all of them mention burning. In the Qur'an though, hell's fire is described in such graphic detail that no further explanation is needed. After reading this description, it seemed to him that God was like a tyrant or a vindictive being, who dealt with weaknesses harshly, as though our actions caused him some kind of personal injury. It was as if there was so much hatred and anger for us in His Heart that He could not even be satisfied when offenders were burnt to ashes but had to keep re-burning them for all eternity. Fateh{puri@ said if this description did not have an alternative meaning, then man's reason would force him to hate this God, and if that is how He is, His qualities of mercy and blessings did not mean a thing.[xxxvi]

Fateh{puri@, trying to be objective, also acknowledged the usefulness of this kind of description of hell and the complete opposite picture drawn of heaven for the masses, especially if it induces them to do good and avoid evil. However, for a man of intelligence and kindness, who does not need to be induced or scared into doing good, this description of hell is disagreeable. [xxxvii] To explain this, Fateh{puri@ made a distinction between the masses and the intelligentsia, saying that it was quite possible for two understandings of the same issue to exist side-by-side. After quoting Shibli@ (cited above), he said that the description found in the Qur'an can be quite appropriate for common understanding and there can be no better way to prevent people from bad behaviour and make them move in the direction of goodness. However, he believed that this cannot be the only interpretation of reward and punishment.

The “real” meaning, according to Fateh{puri@, was that if actions are good or bad, they have corresponding results on the doer’s psyche. Good actions make one feel satisfied and happy, while bad actions make one feel dissatisfied, alone and guilty. He pointed out that these results were not separate from the action; indeed, it was simply cause and effect. He quoted Imam Ghaza@li@ to explain: “The punishment due to bad action does not mean God will be angry, or that He will seek revenge. An example to explain what I mean is that if a man does not go near a woman, he will not have kids (cause and effect). At the time of the Day of Judgment, worship and good actions mean exactly the same thing.” Fateh{puri@ explained further by using the example of a person stealing from another: even if the person who owned the thing forgave the thief, the fact that he stole, would always be a spot on his character that would never be washed away. So, reward and punishment, according to him, are the direct result of one’s actions imposed instantaneously by God on this earth only.[xxxviii]

Fateh{puri@ said that Prophet Muh{ammad was addressing tribal people, whose intellectual abilities could not have been the best. Therefore, a description of heaven and hell had to be found that would satisfy them, and make them endeavour to pursue good and avoid evil.

For them, the ultimate level of luxury and happiness, had not risen above milk, honey, wine and women, and their basic imagination for affliction was to inflict on their enemies the same amount of pain as is found by throwing someone in fire. Therefore, if an attempt was made to lure them into doing good by telling them that they will get spiritual comfort in return, and if they were urged to avoid doing wrong because it will cause spiritual pain, they would not be very impressed. This line of reasoning and exhortation will not work with these people because their mental horizons had not widened enough to appreciate this high philosophy of pleasure and affliction, and Islam would not have succeeded in its mission.[xxxix]

Another reason why he believed that Hell’s fire was not like real fire is:

If the fires of Hell meant the same as fire here on earth, then it would not have been called God’s fire, nor would it be said that the fire is related to hearts. It is obvious that fire in the heart, could only be one which causes spiritual pain, and it is not related to fire as we know it.[xl]

Iqbal clearly was of the same belief that heaven and hell were states of mind rather than places; he denounced the static other-worldliness of religion, as being un-Islamic and inherently evil.[xli] McDonough explains his views further by saying, “The descriptions in the Quran are visual representations of an inner fact, i.e. character. Hell, in the words of the Quran, is God’s kindled fire which mounts above the hearts - the painful realization of one’s failure as a man. Heaven is the joy of triumph over the forces of disintegration. There is no such thing as eternal damnation in Islam.”[xlii]

Shibli@ also presented two understandings of the issue in his work, though not as blatantly, and quoted the same lines from al-Ghaza@li@’s commentary on a Qur’a@nic verse that Fateh{puri@ did: “Hell is right inside you,” he said, and “if you did not understand the meanings in this manner, then you did not get from the Qur’a@n anything except the crust, as the cattle get only the husk from the wheat.”[xliii]

Fateh{puri@ since he was writing for a magazine audience, made an effort to explain his reasoning in the simplest terms possible and by giving examples. In illustration of this and also to further explain the point, here is a quotation:

The way that God has ordered some things and stopped man from doing some other things, is like how a physician recommends some medicines to the sick person and asks him not to eat certain things; if that person disobeys the physician and does not do as told, he increases his ailment. The increase in his ailment is the direct result of his not doing the right things, but people might say that he disobeyed the physician that is why the ailment increased. Although, even if the physician had not told him these things, and he had not done the right things, his ailment would have increased anyhow. Likewise, even if God had not told us right from wrong, wrong deeds would still cause injury to the soul.[xliv]

Fateh{puri@ believed that even though Islam had generally kept the same meaning of reward and punishment, heaven and hell, as religions before it, nevertheless the best thing about Islam is that it had also stated “reality”, although not so openly, and this is what made Islam superior to all other religions. All the other big religions only talk to the masses (a@wa@m), according to Fateh{puri@, while Islam has a message for everyone: intellectuals and the ignorant, fools and the intelligent, the upper classes and the lower classes, mystics and literalists (Sufi@s and Za@hiri@s).

PRAYER AND FASTING

Prayer and fasting (nama@z aur roza) are among the most important aspects of practicing Islam. The strange thing, however, is that the Qur’an is silent on how exactly to perform them. For Fateh{puri@, this clearly meant that the Qur’an and Islam did not want to force people to do things in one particular way. Also, it meant that the Qur’an did not come simply to guide the ‘Arabs, but all of humankind, and since humankind is divided into different communities, they cannot all be forced to pray in just one language and in one particular way (t{ari@qa@). And even if they could, Fateh{puri@ believed, their hearts would never be in it.[xlv]

He explained his point by giving the example of an Eskimo living in an ice house, in a place where there are six months of night. He definitely cannot adopt the Arab ways of worship. How can he do the prayer and fasting (which is dictated by the position of the sun) in the same way? That is why the Qur'an is silent on the right and best way of worship. Worship should merely be of One God and that is the pillar of Islam - it can be through any way.[xlvi]

Fateh{puri@ questioned the extent to which Islamic rulings had Arab influence and consequently, to what extent, in a different time and place, there is need for fresh thinking (ijtihad). He said Shah Wali@ Allah understood that there was such a need and quoted Hujjat Alla@h al-Baligha to the effect. Chira@gh 'Ali@, one of the stalwarts of the Aligarh movement, said unequivocally, "The only law of Muh{ammad or Islam is the Qur'a@n and only the Qur'a@n." [xlvii] Fateh{puri@ agreed and said further that if the Qur'an did not define some issues that are obviously very important, then there must definitely be a reason for this.

PURPOSE OF ZAKA@T

The real purpose of zaka@t (charity), according to Fateh{puri@, was quite clearly to give rightful help to one's relatives and the needy in the community. All Muslims are aware of this, he said; hence, the issue is not in the least debatable. He asked then why it was that many Muslims, despite being aware of this purpose, simply ignored it, and tried to get out of the responsibility of giving zaka@t by proving themselves incapable of it. Regarding the reluctance of the 'ulama@' in particular, he stated: "There are many ways of avoiding zaka@t in the books of fiqh, and many of our 'ulama@'-i kara@m, use them." [xlviii]

Fateh{puri@ described one loophole that people used to avoid zaka@t. When the year is nearing its end, the husband declares all his assets under his wife's name and when the next year-end approaches, the wife transfers them back to her husband, so that neither of them has enjoyed the assets for the year before the taxation date and are not, thus, liable for zaka@t. If the purpose of zaka@t is so clear and obvious, these frauds should not happen, but they do, and the reason for it was very clear in Fateh{puri@'s mind: it was only because Muslims did not understand the spirit behind the Islamic rulings. It is one thing to follow rules and another to understand their purpose and act on it. As he saw it, every religious act that Muslims performed in his day was carried out merely for the sake of ritual. The real purpose was not at the forefront of anyone's mind. And this was why the religion of Islam had become spiritless; this was what was destroying the community.

A reader asked Fateh{puri@ in the Istifsar (question and answer) column of his magazine whether, in view of the fact that he was giving more taxes to the British government than he would have given zaka@t, did he need to give zaka@t as well. Fateh{puri@ replied that even if the taxes were more than zaka@t, the real purpose of zaka@t was not served by that money, which is to help one's relatives and community; therefore, it was not possible to say that one had given it. [xlix]

The point he was trying to make was that the purpose of zaka@t was helping people in need and that one had to do discharge this duty, regardless of what else one had to do to lead a fulfilling life. It was not like a government ruling with which one felt little connection and which could be avoided. Helping people in need should come from within a person; it was part of being a Muslim, not merely a ritual that one is forced to do and that one avoided wherever possible.

FREE WILL OR PREDESTINATION?

This is one debate that has been going on since Muslim scholars first started pondering Islam. What is interesting in Fateh{puri@'s analysis was that he took the middle path. He believed that there is free will but that God is aware of each and every action of man. This might seem like a paradox but he explained that, by saying that God having knowledge of what one is going to do is not binding inasmuch as it does not force man to do exactly that. Man has free will to do what he wants; God only has knowledge of how he will employ his free will. Like every element, such as iron, whose heaviness is a predestined quality, human will (ira@da@-i insa@ni@) is a predestined quality of each man. This quality is what makes a particular person choose a certain option in a given situation, and avoid another. [i]

Fateh{puri@ quoted a saying of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khatta@b (581-644 A.D. c. 634-644 A.D.), in which an evil-doer was presented to him pleading innocence on the ground that God had knowledge of his actions, since they were predestined for him. Caliph 'Umar replied that God certainly had knowledge of the acts but had not forced the man to commit them; they were his choices. Caliph 'Umar quoted a saying of the Prophet to buttress this point, which was that God's knowledge of one's actions is like that of the sky that covers one and the earth on which one walks. Just as one cannot walk away from the earth or run out of sky, one cannot escape from the knowledge of God. And just as the earth and sky do not force you to do evil, the knowledge of God does not force one to do anything. [ii]

Imam Hasan al-Basri^[lii] had said something similar, according to Fateh^[puri@], that if God wants to keep a man away from some action, He will not predestine one to do so; it has to be one's free will to go against God's indictment. Fateh^[puri@] then stated the basic Mu'tazilite^[liii] doctrine, that if God had predestined one to worship Him and do good deeds, there would be no reward (sawa^{@b}) for prayer and right actions. If God has predestined one for evil, one should not be punished. ^[liv]

Fateh^[puri@] thought that most people in his day believed in predestination, as a way of avoiding responsibility for their actions. Predestination is just an excuse for their laziness, their inability to do anything worthwhile. After all, humankind was created to help develop the natural system and was given 'aql so that he could do so. God bestowed His teachings through revelation, as well as the 'aql to discern right from wrong, so that, people can act for the greater good out of their free will. Of course, this confers the responsibility to do what one thinks is right. People cannot blame predestination for their incapacities. ^[lv]

'AKHLA@Q

In what I have studied of Islam, nowhere have I found the narrow-mindedness that is seen in the Muslims of today....It has only taught akhla^{@q} and has told us that, in actuality, Muslims are those, whose akhla^{@q} is pure. ^[lvi]

Akhla^{@q} was the most important characteristic of the religious spirit of action that Fateh^[puri@] wanted to see revived. Being religious was not about saying prayers; it was about being a better person. "Actions speak louder than words," would describe Fateh^[puri@]'s basic belief.

"The greatest characteristics of Islam are its simplicity and its teaching of right action, both of which are related to akhla^{@q} (ethical thinking)." ^[lvii]

W. C. Smith has translated the term akhla^{@q} as the "ethical spirit," ^[lviii] while Sheila McDonough calls it "ethical thinking." ^[lix] It is one of those words that are very difficult to translate since they take on many connotations in different places and times. However, Smith and McDonough have it right when they choose not to translate it simply as ethics, since it is more of a "spirit or thinking" that drives a man to do what is morally correct, and not just a set of moral values.

McDonough uses the word akhla^{@q} to mean a concern with ideal human virtues as well as the development of good social, economic, political and religious structures. ^[lx] She also notes that Sayyid Ah^{{mad Kha@n} used akhla^{@q} to mean constructive training given to an individual on how to relate to other individuals, and how to live in society harmoniously. Since the opposite of that would be lawlessness and chaos, for Sayyid Ah^{{mad} then, akhla^{@q} was an obligation to live in peace, with the feeling of brotherhood and sharing. ^[lxi]

Shibli[@] also assigned considerable importance to the refinement of morals (tadhi^{@b} al-akhla^{@q}) and, like Fateh^[puri@], believed that the Prophets' main concern was to reform the society and instil in it moral values. ^[lxii]

Although many reformers then and even earlier recognized the importance of akhla^{@q}, Fateh^[puri@] went so far as to say that it is the purpose of religion.

After an in-depth study of religions, I have come to the conclusion that no other religion has emphasized the purity of akhla^{@q} as much as Islam. In fact, it has said that the purpose of worship for humans is to attain purity and good qualities. Therefore, you will notice that in the Qur'an, wherever nama^{@z} or another form of worship is mentioned, with it "amilu al sa^{@liha@t}" (good deeds) is also mentioned. So that, if a person's actions are not good, all his worship is useless and he cannot call himself a Muslim in the real sense of the word. Therefore, good deeds are the soul of worship. ^[lxiii]

Akhlaq meant a number of things to him, most importantly, as in Sayyid Ah^{{mad's} view, it meant social behaviour. A person with akhla^{@q} would act for the greater good of everyone, respect people and their opinions, and preserve the feeling of brotherhood and sharing.

Another very important characteristic of akhla^{@q} for him was humility. For a Muslim, having akhla^{@q} meant to be humble about what one possesses whether of intellectual or material nature. Arrogance is the antithesis of having akhla^{@q} - an attitude he observed in the 'ulama[@]', since they believed they knew best about the religion and its practices, and aggressively condemned any re-thinking. They lacked akhla^{@q}, according to him. Incidentally, even the Qur'an encourages humility, and warns against arrogance. "Perform the prayer, and bid unto honour, and forbid dishonour. And bear patiently whatever may befall thee; surely that is true constancy. Turn not thy cheek away from men in scorn, and walk not the earth exultantly; God loves not any man proud and boastful. Be modest in thy walk, and lower thy voice; The most hideous of voice is the ass's." (31:16)

According to Fateh{puri@}'s beliefs, religion and akhla@q are synonymous; one should not exist without the other. He ridiculed the artificial division that had been created between them by the 'ulama@', if one is religious, it should automatically mean that one is a good person, lives in harmony with others, and helps those in need.

From what I understand, the respected 'ulama@ have declared good akhla@q and Islam to be two different entities; and such a relationship has been formed between them that it is possible to have both as well as either.[lxiv]

Having akhla@q should mean doing good deeds for their own sake, according to Fateh{puri@, and because one decides to, not out of fear of hell or greed for heaven. God has provided us with His guidelines, and has also given us reason to discern right from wrong. It is for us to employ it to decide actively to do what is right.

This akhla@q is not the domain of Muslims only, but can be possessed by anyone. Fateh{puri@ debates whether a Muslim with bad akhla@q will go to heaven compared to a non-Muslim with good akhla@q. He concludes that having akhla@q is more important than being a Muslim, if a person is a Muslim in name only and if Islam does not inspire him/her to do good deeds, to be humble and to treat everyone equally.[lxv] He blamed the current religious scholars for making it appear as if memorizing a few verses was more important than having good akhla@q and striving for perfection.

The 'ulama@-i kara@m who consider Muslims with bad akhla@q to be na@ji@ (free of sin) and honest idol-worshippers to be na@ri@ (sinful), prove without saying it in so many words, that just saying without understanding, God's oneness and the prophethood of the Prophet, or let us say, doing worship according to how they (the 'ulama@') would have it, like a shloka (mantra) is enough. And the reason why human beings exist in the universe is only so that they could memorise a few words, because God and His godliness, universe and its natural system's need for worship is accomplished by memorizing a few things.[lxvi]

Fateh{puri@ asked: "Does God need religion or not, and if He does, then is that need fulfilled just by a person saying that he/she is a Muslim.[lxvii] For him, it was obvious that God and his Prophet wanted more.

The Prophet had perfect akhla@q according to Fateh{puri@, worthy of being emulated by all Muslims. He very strongly believed that Prophet led an exemplary life in terms of doing good to others, even when sometimes they did not deserve it.

Let us see what kind of man the Prophet was in terms of akhla@q. Nobody can deny that the Prophet was bestowed with extra-ordinary qualities, but his biggest quality that even his enemies were forced to acknowledge was that he, throughout his life, never said anything that he considered to be not true or whose veracity he was not sure of.[lxviii]

In fact, Fateh{puri@ considered akhla@q to be obviously the most important practice: one did not even need revelation to realize it to be the purpose of one's life. The theory of heaven-hell is not required to understand the usefulness of doing good and the ill effects of evil behaviour.

Akhla@q of man is related only to this world, and their results have been seen here because of which some have been declared good and others bad. These are not affected by which family you come from, nor are they necessary to be accounted for in the other world to give reward or punishment. To consider stealing bad, one does not need a revelation: men saw the problems it caused and made God say it. All crimes cause humanity, physical, economic or societal problems. Every individual naturally seeks to avoid these problems and to keep himself safe from them and it is this desire for security that tells him what is good and what is evil.[lxix]

Fateh{puri@ believed that success in this world is purely defined by being able to cultivate pure akhla@q.

If in reality there can be a scale of measurement for the success and failure of a human life, it is surely social. That is, what service a person gave to his/her community, what sacrifices he/she made for the reform of his/her community and nation, and what benefits did he/she bestow on others from his/her intellectual or material wealth... Saying prayers and staying without food or water from dawn to dusk are in themselves activities without any meaning, if they do not result in some akhla@@@q, and akhla@q is related only to an individual's social life. Therefore, the measure of the success of a person's worship and prayer, is that the person who prays and fasts the most, should also be the person who serves his/her community the most." [lxx]

Fateh{puri@ considered cultivating akhla@q to be religion's purpose, and the goal of every human being:

It cannot be denied that religion's real purpose, was to make a human being really human, separating him from all animalistic instincts, and bring him to such a rational stage, where it is possible to progress in the world and live in peace and harmony. Therefore, any person, no

matter which community or nation s/he belongs to, due to his/her actions and character, if s/he is on that rational stage, then we can say that s/he has found religion in reality, and we cannot force him/her to accept all the other pronouncements that religion considers necessary.[lxxi]

UNIQUENESS OF FATEH{PURI@}'S THOUGHT

Before Fateh{puri@ began writing on religious subjects, much of the way had already been paved by his predecessors, such as Sayyid Ah{mad and Shibli@. Many new ideas had been introduced and the process of re-interpretation of Islam according to modernist thinking had already begun. The uniqueness of Fateh{puri@'s thinking lay in his radicalism. When modernists said Islam had in itself all the modern values of liberalism, rationalism, democracy and equality, he took it seriously. He produced an Islam shorn of all its miraculous wonders, but filled with simple ideals. His Islam was totally rational, consisting only of those things that made sense. If the idea of the Qur'an being the word of God and coming through a human being did not make sense, even that was discarded.

Phobia of the super-natural was also another hallmark of Fateh{puri@'s thinking, even though belief in the "unseen" is also part of Islam. People are attracted to God because He is beyond them; He is someone they can look up to, who is there in time of need, an entity that they must answer to. Belief in religion is ultimately, supernatural, because God is beyond human. If all religion could be reduced to induction and deduction, it loses its mystery and attraction. According to him though, "truth", "ethical thinking" and "right actions" were far more important than "faith." He believed that religion had excellent ideas, which induced man to do good, and urged man to use his reason for the benefit of himself and the world; anything other than that was beyond belief.

As noted earlier, his predecessor, Sayyid Ah{mad, was trying to raise Islam to modern Western standards. He tried to answer the criticisms of Western writers, by showing that Islam was not as backward as it appears, but was instead progressive. The major similarity between Sayyid Ah{mad and Fateh{puri@ was that both were able to see the h{adi@th, shariah (Islamic law) and even the Qur'an, dispassionately. Consequently, they were quite capable of subjecting them to rational criticism, and many new ideas emerged from this scrutiny. Following the tradition of the earlier modernists, like Sayyid Ah{mad, and Shibli@, Fateh{puri@ tried to show that Islam itself had all the values that are needed to survive in the modern age.

In speaking about Sayyid Ah{mad Kha@n and Mawlana Maudu@di@ , Sheila McDonough argues that neither of them thought that modernity meant the end of Islam.[lxxii] They were both trying to assimilate the two, and find ways to be faithful to God in the current situation. The world around them was changing and changing fast; both of them realized that unless Islam adapted to contemporary realities, the religion itself would become extinct. They had different strategies for dealing with it and completely different agendas, but ultimately they were trying to come to terms with the same reality.

Fateh{puri@ was dealing with a similar situation. Sayyid Ah{mad was introducing new ideas among Muslims. He understood this and so he felt a greater need to justify his views. His agenda was basically social and educational; the change in thinking that he was asking for was to serve that purpose. Maudu@di@ @ and Fateh{puri@, on the other hand, were dealing with a situation in which those modern ideas, acceptable or not, had already become known in the society. Even though Maudu@di@ @ was in favour of traditionalism, his way of thinking and expression was that of a modernist. Fateh{puri@ was born in the same age and found western ideas to be similar to his own views and thus, readily acceptable. He sought and found justification for these ideas in Islam and was indeed amazed that the 'ulama@' saw things differently.

Although Fateh{puri@ saw so much sense in Islam - it was the most practical, rational and progressive of all religions for him - nevertheless, he saw no good whatsoever in how it was practised. He wanted major changes, not only in practical details of the religion, but in belief systems. For instance, people trying to avoid zaka@t was an indication of their lack of akhla@q. However, akhla@q was not something that could be dictated to human beings; it was something an individual either developed or did not. He thought all these changes were possible as long as the "right" understanding of Islam, as he would have it, was developed. However, it was quite impossible for everyone to think along the same lines. Not many people would set about finding the right understanding, and practising it and being good people, just because Fateh{puri@ thought it was rational. He was showing what was wrong in the prevailing thinking and that the way out was to adopt akhla@q, i.e., to "really" practice Islam in daily life. But he did not set out a positive agenda on how that was to be worked out.

W.C. Smith concluded about Fateh{puri@'s movement that: "Its lack of positive ideology, however, has

meant that it too has soon petered out. Ethical spirit without positive guidance is either inadequate or superfluous".[lxxiii] Another of Smith's comments was also very telling, i.e., that the new individual was without authority:

The nature of his life - bourgeois society is constantly developing, changing, producing new and more complex situations - was such that he [Sayyid Ah{mad}] could never develop a new authority. At least, not such a new authority as the old had been, a fixed code with ready-made solutions to his problems. Thus it is that Sir Sayyid, in rejecting the old Canon Law, did not replace it with a new one, nor has any of his successors done so; but emphasized only the general moral principles of the Qur'an.[lxxiv]

This is one of the major critiques of the modernist theories of Islam. The old is to be discarded, but to be replaced by what. Fateh{puri}'s answer was akhla@q. Akhla@q though can only be judged individually. Fateh{puri} was convinced that if people think for themselves, if they find out what Islam really meant for them, then even prayer and fasting would lead to the development of good akhla@q. Of course, it sounds very rational and shows great faith in humanity, but it is not very practicable for the vast masses. Most people would just find it easier to follow the ready-made solutions offered by the 'ulama@', rather than think for themselves.

However, even if he is able to inspire a few right-thinking people, a change in the way of thinking is more than possible. Indeed, it is coming about, writers like Jeffrey Lang in the United States who believe in Islam as well as in questioning religion come to quite similar conclusions that Fateh{puri} did. To quote Lang:

The key to success in this life and the hereafter is stated so frequently and formally in the Qur'an that no serious reader can miss it. However, the utter simplicity of the dictum may cause one to disregard it, because it seems to ignore the great questions and complexities of life. The Qur'an maintains that only "those who have faith and do good" (in Arabic: allathina aaminu wa 'amilu al saalihaat) will benefit from their earthly lives (Qur'an - 2:25; 2:82; 2:277; 4:57; 4:122; 5:9; 7:42; 10:9; 11:23; 13:29; 14:23; 18:2; 18:88; 18:107; 19:60; 19:96; 20:75; 20:82; 20:112; 21:94; 22:14; 22:23; 22:50; 22:56; 24:55; 25:70-71; 26:67; 28:80; 29:7; 29:9; 29:58; 30:15; 30:45; 31:8; 32:19; 34:4; 34:37; 35:7; 38:24; 41:8; 42:22; 42:23; 42:26; 45:21; 45:30; 47:2; 47:12; 48:29; 64:9; 65:11; 84:25; 85:11; 95:6; 98:7; 103:3).[lxxv]

Believing in God and doing good deeds, in other words, akhla@q, that is what characterizes a successful and religious life on this earth, based on a rational reading of the Qur'an. The above quotation also proves the frequency with which the Qur'an asks one to be good human beings, and as Fateh{puri} would have it that is what it means to be good Muslims.

Niyaz Fatehpuri, (1884-1966 A.D./1302-1384 A.H) was an accomplished literary critic, poet and religious scholar. He published a very prestigious monthly magazine Nigaar, which began as a literary journal in 1922, and soon became a platform for scholars for debating many of the most controversial religious, ideological, political and sociological issues of the time. Fatehpuri completed most of his initial education in Madrasa-i-Islamia in Fatehpur itself and later at Madrasa-i-Aliya, Rampur. Afterwards, he studied at Farngi Mahal and at the Nadwatul-Ulama, Lucknow. He passed his matriculation examination (British school system) in Fatehpur in 1899.

Throughout his life, Fatehpuri tirelessly advocated the belief that religion needs to be reinterpreted in the light of new knowledge of the time and place that Muslims find themselves in, based on the accepted religious sources. He spoke as a religious man, which came not only from his deep knowledge and study of the religion but from his firm conviction in it. Fatehpuri carried out a crusade against the Ulama whom he considered responsible for the stagnation in Muslim religious thinking, and which in turn, was making them suffer even in social and economic spheres. He believed that the basic purpose of religion was to teach Akhlaq (ethical spirit) to people. Akhlaq for him, meant doing good deeds for their own sake (as an individual's natural duty) and for the love of God.

Fatehpuri spent most of his adult age in Lucknow and left for Karachi in 1962. He was welcomed in Pakistan and was able to restart Nigaar there, continuing to write until his death in 1966.

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