

The War within Islam(16 Mar 2009 NewAgeIslam.Com)

An ode to debate in Islam!

**THE War within Islam: Niyaz Fatehpuri's struggle against Islamic Fundamentalism by Juhi Shahin is a collection of writings by one Niyaz Fatehpuri (1884-1966).**



Niyaz Fatehpuri

Fatehpuri was the publisher of a monthly magazine called Nigar, which became a hot pot of literary and religious discussion in its time. The book is an attempt to bring to light the unique and forward thinking views of Fatehpuri to a generation far removed from its own intellectual heritage and its own language, Urdu. The book walks the reader through the life of Niyaz Fatehpuri, but dwells much more so on his religious views.

As I approached this book, I did so with little if any knowledge of the subject-person. However, as I read the meaty chapters of the book, namely those directly based on Fatehpuri's religious views, the book grew more interesting. Fatehpuri was one of the few intellectuals of his time who actively opposed the theocratic principle, the formation of a religious elite (the ulema) and the formation of a separate Muslim state. Instead of the practices, he focused on the moral values prescribed by religion. Most of his words revolve around akhlaq, the practice of virtue, and he actively questioned the overemphasis on archaic practices.

He even went so far as to question whether religion is a creation of man; that is an interpretation of the inspiration bestowed on man by Allah. Though Fatehpuri's knowledge of religion was well-established and his faith in God unquestionable, he nevertheless reasoned that religion served a purpose to society which could only be borne out through human intellect. Unlike many of his contemporaries Fatehpuri asserted that religion was a completely rational vessel, which could evolve and grow alongwith the capacity of the human race.

The book recalls a time when there was such a thing as debate in Islam; not just restricted to what the most appropriate punishment for an adulterer was, but the fundamental nature of belief, the very metaphysics at the heart of any religion. And with time, as Muslims have been reduced to the very scourge of humanity, it is the death of this very debate that stands at the core of our downfall. It must be noted that though Fatehpuri reasoned very radical ideals, at no time were fatwas pronounced against him, nor were the recipients of his harshest criticism, the ulema, able to dent his reputation in any major way. However, in recent times people like Fatehpuri have all but disappeared and the ulema have grown in ranks, such that no one can criticise them without fear of a backlash any more.

The relevance of this book in modern times is questionable. But we live in a country where every third book is a refurbished PhD, MA or BA thesis (as is the case with the book in question), which only invokes the irrelevance of our entire microcosm of letters. Of the readers of this review, only a handful might have read the works of Niyaz Fatehpuri, and likely none of them would be under age 30. This is primarily because in our culture of romanticism, the rational intellectual is rarely applauded. Even those who have honed both romantic and rational aspects of their intellect are seen mostly in the paradigm of their romantic pursuits. Such is the fate of our intellectuals, dead or alive. ;  
— Reviewed by HAIDER WARRAICH in The Dawn, Karachi  
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Excerpts from the concluding chapter of  
**THE War within Islam: Niyaz Fatehpuri's struggle against Islamic Fundamentalism**  
by Juhi Shahin

Fatehpuri envisioned an Islam shorn of all its miraculous wonders, but filled with simple ideals. According to him, truth, ethical thinking and right actions were far more important than faith.

ONE of the most fascinating aspects of studying Fatehpuri is that he understood so well the predicament of Muslims in his time, and the crisis of faith that they will be facing in the future. He understood what is called the 'challenge of modernity.' And interpreted Islam in such a way that it was not just a tradition that one followed, but what one wanted to believe in, simply because it made sense.

Fatehpuri argued throughout his journalistic career that religion is not about saying prayers, it is about belief that comes from rational ideas and doing good. He had a simple, pragmatic and socially responsible approach to life, which in his understanding was supremely religious.

Niyaz Fatehpuri's socio-religious views, were and remain controversial. Although he was a well-known name in South Asia, not just for his religious views but also for his literary criticism, people were not quite sure what to make of his religious ideas and his campaign against the ulema.

On one hand his articles were extremely credible and well-argued; on the other, they were sometimes overly logical and strayed too far from popular belief. They should be read with caution like everything else, including the pronouncements of the ulema this was all he was arguing. Everything in Islam is meaningful, according to him, and should be thought about and not blindly accepted.

**Akhlaq was the most important religious teaching for Fatehpuri**

Akhlaq was the most important religious teaching for Fatehpuri, as it was for his predecessors and contemporaries like Shah Wali Allah, Sayyid Ahmad, and Shibli Naumani. He, however, was the first to declare akhlaq to be the purpose of religion.

Fatehpuri took pains to point out the fact that Islam, more than any other religion, has emphasised social relations, behaviour and law. He emphasized how important it was in Islamic context to have righteous conduct, a feeling of sharing and brotherhood, and a belief in progress of all people.

There was no doubt, according to him, that prayer and fasting were important in themselves, but they should also teach people to become better human beings. Religion should not merely be ritualistic, but should actively teach humility, kindness and a feeling of brotherhood; only then would it be — a complete religion.

**Fatehpuri envisioned an Islam shorn of all its miraculous wonders, but filled with simple ideals.**

Fatehpuri envisioned an Islam shorn of all its miraculous wonders, but filled with simple ideals. According to him, truth, ethical thinking and right actions were far more important than faith. Islam meant to him a positive action, a choice of doing good and a decision to move forward with the times.

He strongly believed that Islam asked humankind to think, reason and increase our knowledge in all possible ways, and consequently,

progress and develop. He had an Utopian idea of how the world would be if only everyone was rational and was working towards the greater good.

Now see the way of reason, how clear and attractive it is, look at the wide spaces, the earth in full bloom, every individual trying to lighten the load of another, and every mind thinking of ways to give the future generations comfort and happiness.

Neither are there gallows, nor prisons, nor the fire of hell, nor the whips of angels. There are just the abundant resources of nature from which human beings are sharing equally; there is just the light of knowledge trying to envelope everyone equally.

The bounds of humanity are broken; the stain of slavery has been removed from the forehead of humanity. Mental freedom has allowed many different kinds of gardens to bloom and every individual seems to be brotherly towards another.

Fatehpuri wanted major changes in the attitudes and beliefs of people, so that their dependency on the ulama would be reduced. He thought all these changes were possible if the right understanding of Islam was developed.

However, not many people would try to achieve the right understanding and practise it and be good people, just because Fatehpuri thought it was rational. He was showing what was wrong in the prevailing thinking and that the way out was to adopt akhlaq, i.e., to 'really' practice Islam in daily life.

#### **A fundamental difference between Sir Sayyid Ahmad and Fatehpuri's respective critiques of the ulama**

There is a fundamental difference between Sayyid Ahmad and Fatehpuri's respective critiques of the ulama. Sayyid Ahmad had a reformist agenda separate from this critique which he was trying to promote.

Fatehpuri, on the other hand, had no other reformist agenda. He was simply opposing the ulama since their worldview was irrational, according to him, and since fresh thinking on religious issues was essential for any progress of the Muslim community. Promoting reason and rethinking in itself was his movement.

This was his strength as well as his weakness – strength since he had no ulterior motive, and weakness since he did not suggest any alternative.

One might or might not agree with his rational interpretation and his real Islam, but this does not take away from his argument that Islam should be re-interpreted, as has been done time and again, throughout Islamic history. Why is it that on religious issues, no questions are encouraged anymore? This was a sign of decline for Fatehpuri.

A progressive religion and people are always ready to adapt and move forward with the times. The inability of Muslims and Islam to do so in his day, he believed, was to their own disadvantage. Thinking rationally, employing one's aql, was an inherent part of being Muslim for Fatehpuri.

The fact that the ulama actively discouraged any new thinking made them his adversaries. He juxtaposed his own thinking with the belief of the ulama to explain how his own views were more rational than theirs. He was quite willing to hear their responses, but he claimed that he never received any reasonable answers.

However, the ulama's version of Islam persists in South Asia and Fatehpuri, despite his broader interpretation of Islam, had only a limited impact. An obvious factor in this was that the ulama were naturally more institutionalised; they constituted a whole class of people spread all across South Asia. This enabled the ulama to reach the farthest corners of South Asia, while Fatehpuri was speaking only to the educated people through the medium of a magazine.

Fatehpuri was individualistic in many ways – one major instance of this can be seen in the fact that he was individually taking on a whole class of people very much entrenched in society.

On the other hand, he was a believer in societal values, since he wanted to sustain the basic structure of society as it was while working for progress, and not completely westernise it. Quite modern in many ways, but as seen in case of women, he could be closer to traditional values as well. Fatehpuri refused to be bracketed and went wherever his logic and reason took him.

This fact attests to his credibility as well, since he did not seem to be promoting a particular world view, except teaching Muslims to believe in progress and fresh thinking.

Zaman argues that the scholars that are borne out of the impact of western modernity were themselves a disruption in the history of discursive practices. Since in responding to their perception of the challenges of modern age, they have tried to find ways to make Islam compatible with it and in the effort to do so, far-reaching changes have been proposed which do not come from within but will be superimposed because of certain people's perception of what ought to be.

#### **Modernists were grappling with an onslaught of new, Western ideas**

While it is true that all the modernists were products of the same colonial age and were grappling with a similar onslaught of new ideas, they were not all lay-persons imposing what they thought was appropriate, like Zaman puts it. Many of them were 'alims themselves and had arrived at their conclusions rationally. They were not part of the ulama as a class, which is probably why they were able to say things against it.

Most modernists were either appropriating or reacting to western ideas and the model of modern society facing them. Some of them became reactionaries, totally rejecting anything western and campaigning for a return to Islamic roots. Yet others adopted a more pro-western attitude. Fatehpuri is special in this regard, since he judged each issue on its own merit and did not really belong to either of these streams.

He discussed western philosophy, and appropriated progressive ideas that he found useful in an Indian Muslim context, but he never argued that what the West had achieved was progress.

In fact, he argued that the West enjoyed only mechanical progress, that it did not have a responsible society and that its progress was devoid of any connection to religion and culture. Whatever new ideas he proposed were supported with careful argument and logic, keeping Indian Muslim society in mind.

W.C. Smith said that Nigar provided leadership to those people who wanted to find the justification for modern concepts like naturalism, socialism and rationalism in Islam. Smith argued that Islam becomes secondary in the minds of scholars like Fatehpuri; Islam is acceptable because it is rational according to their interpretation. However, Smith insists that does not mean Fatehpuri was not a progressive, and was not looking for a religion of the future.

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