

# FOREWORD

**Riffat Hassan**

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In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, more attention has been focused on Islam and Muslims than perhaps at any other point in modern history. Much of this attention—particularly in the case of mainstream U.S. television channels—has been negative, associating both Islam and Muslims with violence. The negative stereotyping and imaging of Islam and Muslims is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as the first chapter of Islamic history, when the new religion began to move into territories largely occupied by Christians, and Muslims were seen not only as “the Other” but as “the Adversary”. However, the worldview, which became dominant—particularly in the West—since the onset of the “war on terror”, polarizing the world into two absolutely opposing camps, has generated a discourse, which constitutes a new challenge for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Dualistic thinking, which permeates this discourse, seems, at times, to be cosmic in magnitude, and makes it seem as if the so-called “clash of civilizations” between the “West” and “the world of Islam” posited by Samuel Huntington has indeed come to pass.

While popular Western media continues, in general, to portray Islam as a religion spread by the sword and characterized by “Holy War,” and Muslims as barbarous, backward, frenzied, fanatic, volatile, and violent, important initiatives have been taken by a number of scholars of Islam to present a knowledge-based account of various aspects of the Islamic tradition. Of significance amongst scholarly works, written by Muslim scholars against the backdrop of the contemporary situation, is Dr. Abdur Rab’s *Exploring Islam in a New Light: An Understanding from the Quranic Perspective*, a wide-ranging book, in which the author shares his own understanding of Islam, as he has studied and lived it.

The Qur’an is regarded as the highest source of authority by the majority of Muslims. However, most Muslims also consider the Sunnah (practical traditions) and the Hadith (oral traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad to be sources of normative Islam. Dr. Rab belongs to a school of thought, which holds the view that the Qur’an embodies the core message of Islam, which is best understood if one focuses solely on the Qur’an. He argues against the use of Hadith for a number of reasons and points out that his book “is a renewed systematic attempt to show that there are serious problems with the so-called Prophetic traditions. It looks at the accumulated evidence against the reliability

and authenticity of the Hadith in terms of theological (Quranic) sanction or authority, historical basis, and objective criteria such as consistency with the Quran, reason and scientific truths. The ideas that seriously distort religious conceptions and practices, demonize and weaken women's position in society, encourage fanaticism and fatalism, block progress and modernization, encourage intolerance, violence and terror and extol the virtues of aggressive *jihad* ("holy war") against other communities—all come from the Hadith."

It may be stated here that the modernist reformist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in the Indian sub-continent, also put great emphasis on the Qur'an, and that their rallying cry was "Back to the Qur'an, forward with *Ijtihad*." However, most of them accepted the Sunnah as an integral part of Islam and did not reject Hadith as a source of Islam though they advocated the use of only authentic "*hadith*." In more recent times, there have been scholars, such as Kassim Ahmad of Malaysia, and Ghulam Ahmed Parwez of Pakistan, who have taken a position similar to that of Dr. Rab on the Qur'an vis-à-vis the Hadith.

Dr. Rab states why he considers the Qur'an to be divinely inspired. In his view, "The book suggests that the religion professed by the Quran is essentially humane and scientific in nature. Some of the awe-inspiring features of this Quranic message are its eloquence, profundity, comprehensiveness, logical coherence and rational orientation, immutability and dynamic flexibility in the face of changing contexts."

Dr. Rab believes that "The Quran inspires us to envision and build a human society where peace, security, justice and compassion and an environment conducive to the uplifting of all humankind prevail." In the light of its teachings, Dr. Rab explores various subjects such as the relation of religion to science, how human beings can achieve spiritual progress, what constitutes righteousness, and the significance and purpose of religious practices such as prayer ("*salat*"), spending in God's way ("*zakat*"), fasting ("*siyam*"), and pilgrimage ("*hajj*"). Dr. Rab's concept of the above-mentioned four "pillars" of Islam is much broader than the conventional one, being grounded in the ethical and mystical core of Qur'anic teaching.

Dr. Rab regards Ego, Love, Will and Knowledge as "the fundamental building blocks of the way forward to spiritual progress or evolution," and believes that these four factors combined with planning and execution lead to creative action. In his view, Heaven and Hell are not created by God but by our own deeds, and the purpose of religion is to "transform this earth into a Heaven and create a still better afterlife" through our deeds.

Dr. Rab states that “The true image of Islam countenances neither intolerance nor violence nor harsh punishments,” and that the Qur’an does not warrant a rigid application of the “Shari’ah” (traditional Islamic law). He looks at issues of marriage, divorce, the status of women, and the treatment of slaves, pointing out what he considers to be permissible or impermissible in Islam.

In his book, Dr. Rab, a distinguished internationally-recognized economist, explores the implications of Islam for the economic system, which he summarizes as follows: “The Qur’an calls for a free and exploitation-free egalitarian economic system. . . . While there should be recognition of private initiative and enterprise, and hence of private property and ownership, this should be subject to an understanding that all things ultimately belong to God. One important implication of the Quranic directions is that there should be an equitable distribution of economic resources, especially land, if these are found to be starkly unequal in a society. An important message of Islam is that none should fully enjoy his own fruits of labor but should share them with his fellow beings through an appropriate distribution system. . . . Contrary to what is generally believed among Muslims, the Qur’an does not really condemn interest *per se* that is being universally used for lending and borrowing purposes and also as a monetary policy instrument and an essential device for efficient allocation of productive resources. What it condemns is interest that is charged to people who deserve humanitarian treatment.”

In the final chapter of his book, Dr. Rab reflects “on the rise of religious fanaticism among ‘Muslims’”, which he largely attributes to the Wahhabi ideology patronized by the Saudi Arabian government. He advocates that traditional “*madrasabs*” should be “thoroughly remodeled on the pattern of modern schools.” Dr. Rab believes that the “true revival of Islam” can only take place “when Muslims understand and return to their only Holy Book, the Quran.”

In the Preface to *Exploring Islam in a New Light : An Understanding from the Quranic Perspective*, Dr. Rab has correctly stated that “This book is a marked departure” from a conventional interpretation of Islam. In his words, “It is an attempt to look afresh at the meaning and role of religion *per se* in general and provide a primer on the message of Islam in particular solely on the basis of the Qur’an.” Whether or not one agrees with all of Dr. Rab’s views, his book is a serious modern attempt at understanding Islam profoundly from within. Dr. Rab’s deep and dedicated study of the Qur’an makes his book—first and foremost—a labor of love. It is also a book that offers valuable insights on a number of issues of interest and concern to contemporary Muslims. Though Dr. Rab has written his book as a committed Muslim, his book has much to offer to all readers who are keen to see and understand Islam as it is embod-

ied in the Qur'an, which has been the major source of inspiration to the most outstanding modernist reformist Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.

Foreword to *Exploring Islam In a New Light : An Understanding from the Qur'anic Perspective*, by Dr. Abdur Rab, iUniverse, Inc, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2008 pp. vii - x