

BOOK REVIEW

Bio:

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Abstract:

This book review evaluates Ishrat Aziz's *The Quran and Modernity: Perspectives in a Globalized World* as a contribution to contemporary Muslim thought and public understanding of Islam. The review argues that Aziz's work challenges both rigid internal interpretations of Islam and external Islamophobic narratives by returning to the Qur'an's principles of reason, justice, human dignity, liberty, and equality. It highlights the author's insistence that no single individual or school can interpret the Qur'an for all times and places, and that *ijtihad* remains essential for addressing changing political and social conditions. The review emphasizes Aziz's claim that coercive or exclusionary readings of Islam contradict the Qur'an's central message, including the principle that there is no compulsion in religion. It also situates modern extremism and authoritarianism within historical and political processes rather than within Islam itself. The review concludes that the book offers a dynamic and reform-minded account of Qur'anic interpretation, one capable of helping Muslims renew their engagement with the faith while also challenging distorted public representations of Islam.

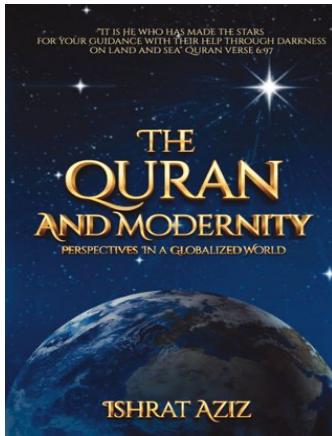
A fresh understanding of the Quran challenges both modern-day Muslims and Islamophobia

Talmiz Ahmad

The Quran and Modernity: Perspectives in a Globalized World

Ishrat Aziz

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A large part of contemporary politics involves Islam, the faith, and its adherents – the Muslims. In the US and in large parts of Europe, strong rightwing movements have emerged that view Muslims as the principal threat to “Western” culture and identity, recalling the fraught encounters between the armies of Christianity and Islam a millennium ago. On their part, over the last four decades, several Muslims in different parts of the world have associated themselves with “jihad” – wreaking violence indiscriminately upon innocent communities in the name of defending their faith.

While large sections of the international community are hostile to the faith and its adherents, Muslims themselves are also “perplexed”, as Aziz points out. Given that there are over a billion Muslims in the world, with a third living as minorities in non-Muslim countries, it is not surprising that many of them wonder whether a democratic order, a pluralistic society and the modern industrial economy are compatible with Islamic injunctions; or are concerned about the place of personal law, sectarian divisions, and jihad in contemporary times.

On the basis of painstaking research and a lucid presentation, Aziz’s book provides answers to questions about the faith both to bewildered believers and hostile non-Muslims.

The Quran

The author, Ishrat Aziz, former Indian ambassador to Tunisia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has gone back to the fundamentals of the Muslim faith: through a close reading of Islam’s foundational text, the Quran, he has identified the core values and principles of the faith and has examined whether they are compatible with the demands of the modern state, society and culture.

The Quran is a unique text in that it is based on divine revelations to Prophet Mohammed through the Angel Gabriel. The first revelation occurred in 610, when the prophet was 40 years old; the last one occurred in 632, a few months before his passing away. A final definitive text of the Quran was prepared during the caliphate of Othman (573-656); this is the text that is used today by Muslims across the world.

Besides the Quran, Islam's other basic sources are the Sunnah and the Hadith, the first being the practices of the prophet and the latter his pronouncements. These were compiled between 200-250 years after the prophet's death.

Again, over the centuries since the emergence of Islam, numerous scholars have produced commentaries on the Quran and the Hadith setting out the meaning and recommended implementation of these texts. Four schools of jurisprudence within the Sunni sect of Islam emerged about two centuries after the passing away of the prophet on the basis of commentaries by scholars and their students. The Quran, the Hadith and these commentaries constitute the Shariah or the body of Islamic law.

As Aziz has emphasised, only the Quran is divine; all the other foundational sources – the Hadith and the commentaries – are man-made and thus can be revisited by contemporary scholars who can interpret them in the context of modern times. It is these fresh interpretations that impart to the faith its vitality and contemporary value.

At the outset, the author makes the important point that no individual or school can interpret the Quran for all times, places, and circumstances. Obtaining a fresh understanding of the Quran in changing times can be done through "ijtihad", 'personal effort'. This is a constant endeavour to address the challenges posed by new or unique developments in the political or social order.

It firmly rejects the contention of some commentators nine centuries ago that, with the establishment of the four schools of Sunni Islam, the "gates of ijtihad are closed". God, the author points out, encourages humankind to apply their mind to think, reason and seek knowledge. Thus, a Quranic verse states: "We have made our revelations clear to you. Use reason to understand them." In a Hadith, the holy prophet said:

Acquire knowledge. It enables the possessor to distinguish right from wrong; it lights the way to heaven; it is our friend in the desert; our society in solitude; our companion when friendless; it gives us happiness; it sustains us in misery; it is an ornament among friends and an armour against enemies.

Aziz points out that "the Quran's basic message upholds liberty, justice, equality and human dignity for all", backed by the divine instruction: "There is no compulsion in religion." The author asserts that "any interpretation that calls for the imposition of faith would be contrary to this basic message of the Quran". This verse not only upholds human freedom, it also rejects the concepts of apostasy, heresy, and blasphemy because they amount to compulsion in religion.

Above all, throughout the Quran, God emphasises the importance of compassion, mercifulness and forgiveness in his creatures; as He says in the Quran: "You shall never attain true piety unless you give others from what you cherish yourself"; and then again: "... those that have faith and do good deeds are the inheritors of paradise."

Addressing misinterpretations

The author has done a great service by examining, in the light of specific Quranic injunctions, certain matters that are attributed to Islam, which have greatly harmed the image of the faith, such as: status of women and polygamy, punishments, jihad, and the nature of the state order.

Status of women

Through extensive references to Quranic verses, Aziz points out that men and women are placed on par with each other and will be equally rewarded for their deeds by God. Thus, God says in the Quran:

- “Men shall be rewarded according to their efforts, and women shall be rewarded according to their efforts.”
- “The believers who have faith and do good deeds, both men and women, shall enter paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustice.”

The author has paid particular attention to one verse in the Quran that reads as follows: “Women shall, in fairness, have rights similar to those exercised vis-à-vis them, *although men have a status above women.*” While the first part of the verse speaks of similar rights being exercised by men and women, the second part appears to contradict this equality of status and rights. Aziz argues that, given the numerous verses affirming equality of men and women, this verse can be explained by reading it only as a reference to the responsibility of the man as the breadwinner and guardian of the family. A Hadith of the prophet confirms this understanding:

Oh people, it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. ... Treat your women well and be kind to them, for *they are your partners and committed helpers.*

In this background, Aziz has discussed the matter of polygamy. One Quranic verse sanctions polygamy thus:

If you fear the inability to deal fairly with the orphans, marry women of your choice – two, three or four. But if you fear that you shall not be able to maintain equality between them, then marry only one. ... This is better for you to avoid injustice.

This Quranic verse has made polygamy conditional on the man’s ability “to maintain equality between them”. But the Quran, in a separate verse, makes it clear that such equal treatment is not likely: “However much you may want and try, you cannot treat all your wives with equal fairness.” Clearly, the Quran does not approve of polygamy.

Hudood punishments

In the area of crime and punishment, the principal focus of the Quran is on justice coupled with mercy and on making every effort to ensure that an innocent person is not punished, even inadvertently, eg: “Respond to evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your best friend.”

The author has then carefully discussed the issue of “Hudood punishments”, which include public beheading, stoning to death, amputations of hands and feet, and lashings. He points out that this term does not figure in the Quran or the Hadith, nor was it used by the first four caliphs. It is a creation of later jurists who viewed certain crimes as offenses against God by crossing the limits on conduct set by God.

However, there is no consensus among scholars about the nature and extent of crimes which would attract “Hudood” punishments. While later jurists prescribe death for apostasy, the Quran merely provides for the death sentence if apostasy is associated with treason or a rebellion. Again, while the Quran provides for lashes for adultery, later jurists have insisted on the death sentence by stoning. The irony is that the enforcement of Islamic law is now generally associated with these harsh punishments rather than the emphasis on mercy, repentance and forgiveness that are extensively discussed in the Quran and Hadith.

Jihad

Due to frequent references to “jihad” in contemporary times, the author has examined this issue in some detail. He points out that this word is used in the Quran in the sense of a “struggle” rather than war, and that this struggle is “to secure the community, strengthen its well-being and promote progress”. Every “struggle” in this regard is “jihad” – be it academic achievement, medical treatment, running successful businesses, teaching students, pursuing reform in society, etc. Jihad in this sense, the author notes, is “a holy struggle [that] lasts for one’s whole lifetime”. As the prophet has said: “The most excellent jihad is that for the conquest of self.”

The Quran also has very precise prescriptions relating to jihad as “holy war”:

- “Permission is given to those who have been attacked to take up arms, because they have been wronged.”
- “Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not attack them first. God does not like transgressors.”
- “And why should you not fight for the cause of God and for those oppressed men, women and children who say: Rescue us Oh Lord from the oppressors of this city.”

Jihad, in the eyes of God, is self-defence and its purpose is the protection of the oppressed. In this context, Aziz firmly asserts that “the way jihad is being carried out by Muslims today is contrary to the Quran, Sunnah and Hadith”.

The ideal Islamic state

Following a careful reading of the Quran and Hadith, Aziz asserts that the Islamic state envisaged in the faith’s foundational texts is a democratic state. Not only do these texts give a central place to justice, equality and tolerance, but they also assert the importance of consent, consultation and public welfare in the functioning of the political order.

As God has instructed in the Quran: “Consult them [the people] about matters, and, when a decision has been taken, put your trust in God.” Again, the prophet said in a Hadith: “My

nation will not unite on misguidance, so if you see them differing, follow the great majority.” The prophet has approved the Muslim’s right to oppose an unjust ruler; he said: “... Obedience [to the ruler] is only with regard to what is right and proper.”

Continuity and change in Islam

Aziz draws from the Quran itself the idea that some verses are more important than others and asserts that the verses upholding justice, equality, human dignity, charity, compassion, and forgiveness constitute the fundamental message of the Quran. He explains that just as all detailed clauses in a constitution must conform with the preamble and articles on fundamental rights, similarly, the other verses of the Quran must be in accord with the basic principles and values in the Scripture.

Flowing from this, just as changes in detailed laws do not change the basic structure of the Constitution, similarly reforms in matters of detail do not constitute a change in the basic message of Quran. Thus, giving equal rights to women in matters of marriage, divorce, and maintenance, or according full political and economic rights to non-Muslims in a Muslim society do not conflict with the fundamental message of Quran, but they are, in fact, in accord with the fundamental principles of equality and justice enshrined in the Quran.

Obviously, several problems still remain – many of the negative aspects of the faith are the products of historical processes over which Muslims have had little control, but which have cumulatively besmirched the image of Islam and its followers. For instance, it is important to recall that the “global jihad” in Afghanistan, which spawned violent extremist movements across West Asia and beyond for several decades, did not emerge from Islam but was a carefully-planned political project. It was put together by the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to confront Soviet interests during the Cold War, with its sponsors paying little heed to the implications of this cynical use of faith for short-term political purposes.

Again, today most Muslim communities are ill-served by their rulers. Sustained western political interventions over the last two centuries have made Muslim states both authoritarian and fragile, and beholden to western interests rather than serving public welfare. Many of these states have justified their harsh and coercive order through specious references to Islamic tenets. The distinguished Egyptian scholar, Nazih Ayubi, had described the present-day Arab state as a “fierce” state that deals with its citizens through “coercion and raw force” and the exercise of arbitrary power. Ishrat Aziz’s book makes it clear that, while these states may have Muslim rulers, they are *not* Islamic states.

The author’s explication of the Quran has broken the logjam in Islamic thought and replaced stagnation and sterility with vigour and dynamism. The book provides fresh perceptions of Islam and can help to reshape the understanding of the faith both among Muslims themselves and those antagonistic to them. This is, therefore, a path-breaking presentation.

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book, West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games, was published by HarperCollins in 2022.)