Muhammad Shahrur and the Printed Word

Until 1996, six years after the publication of Muhammad Shahrur’s Proposal for an Islamic Covenant, his sense of public was as austere as that expressed by Immanuel Kant in the Enlightenment. Kant argued that the printed word, unlike direct speech, offers the ‘public’ the possibility of judging ideas independently from the status or authority of their authors. Muhammad Shahrur acknowledges his lack of credentials in Islamic scholarship. Despite this deficiency, his courage in entering an arena of public discussion, previously reserved for trained jurists, has incited strong interest in his ideas among many educated speakers of Arabic throughout the world.

Challenging his authority, usually on the basis that he ignores centuries of established jurisprudence and commits errors of interpretation rather than engage in time-consuming exposition, remains the printed word. Until recently, few of his writings have been available in English. His Proposal for an Islamic Covenant was the first readily available public statement of his views in English. The document was originally produced upon the invitation of the International Forum of Islamic Dialogue in London in mid-1999 as part of its ‘Islam 21’ discussion group formed to create a ‘manifesto’ binding charter to implement Islamic principles in the contemporary world.

Shahrur’s Proposal is blunt. In the Arab Muslim world, he argues, ‘entrenched oppressive regimes’ flaunt slogans of modernity, science, and development, but accomplish nothing. The Islamic ‘revival’, for its part, is ‘hopelessly lost in protest and bargaining over secondary issues such as the Islamic veil, the republication of ancient texts by the millions, and in perpetuating senseless acts of violence with obscure goals’ (p. 5). Shahrur argues that the role of human emotion, as exercised by individual believers, is key to moral and civil development. God has a covenant (mitaḥa) with humankind based on reciprocal, binding trust in which God promises to grant salvation to all who believe.

Shahrur is especially harsh in his condemnation of the traditional Arabic jihād. He treats it as homogenous, characterizing it as failing to explain the concepts of freedom, dominion, and legislation’ so central to God’s covenant with humanity. This clear contractual covenant is distorted and badly explained in heritage literature (sunūṭ) and by those traditional jurists (fuqaha) who were closed to the participation of the laity and satisfied with reductive notions of freedom. They saw freedom merely as the exemption from slavery, commercial licensing in an earlier historical era, and did not explore its more basic meaning – to choose between belief and disbelief, and ‘obedience and disobedience’ (pp. 12-13).

Yet societies in different historical periods need freedom, knowledge, and legislation ‘according to their level of understanding’ (p. 12). From Noah to the Prophet Muhammad, anyone who commits themselves to believing in God as the only God, to believe in Judgement Day, and to ‘do right (ṣalāḥ) among themselves and for the rest of mankind’ is a Muslim (pp. 14-15). Diversification in religious and cultural spaces, in freedom of expression, ‘is a natural law affirmed by God Himself’. ‘Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation: but they will not cease differing’ (Sura 11, Hud, v. 118) (p. 17). In this sense, all believers – be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or the followers of the faiths that specifically follow the Islamic (imām) is a specific covenant between God and believers who specifically follow the prophecy of Muhammad. Shahrur bases the authority of his approach entirely on his interpretation of the Qur’an. 79 verses are cited in 43 pages, near the end of the text. Having established the rule of reason in understanding Islam and the diversity of Islamic religious practices, in his last 22 pages, Shahrur pushes for an Islamic covenant that takes up the latter half of the book. Basic to this project are the ‘absolute values of justice and freedom, and the encouragement of good and the prohibition of evil’ (p. 27). These include consultation (shura), the encouragement of good and the prohibition of evil.

In his expression of these moral principles, Shahrur reads like any number of Islamic modernist thinkers. The strong divergence begins when he unequivocally identifies shura with democracy, stating that it is the ‘best relative form of government in which all humankind can participate’ (p. 28). Democracy unequivocally means the presence of genuine opposition, ‘political pluralism, freedom of opinion and expression, and the freedom to express ideas peacefully through the available means of communica- tion, and unbridled and non-corrupt com- mittees that can freelyVintage of Copyright.

Born in 1938, Shahrur attended primary and secondary school in his native Damascus, and was sent to Moscow at the age of nine. Upon his return to Syria in 1972, he became a faculty member at the University of Damascus, from which he retired last year.

Shahrur in Arabic: thick description

His first book, al-Rībat wa al-Qur’ān: Qira’a Dirasat Islamiyya al mā’īn (The Book and the Qur’an: A Contemporary Interpretation) immediately became a best seller in 1996. The first printing in Damascus sold out in three months. By 1993, sales of the authorised editions published in Damascus, followed by Beirut in 1992, totalled nearly 30,000 copies. To these figures must be added the thousands of photocopies circulating in countries where the book was banned, such as Saudi Arabia. By 1994, an attractively produced pirate version had appeared in Cairo. In addition to his first book, Shahrur published two sequels in 1994. A fourth book, concerned with jurisprudence related to women, including inheritance, appeared in 2000. To gather these four volumes total approximately 1,600 pages – daunting even for dedicated readers. The first book received numerous reviews and newspaper commentaries. It also generated works opposing Shahrur’s interpretive approach and his views on religious law and the role of the state in the community.

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 222.

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Translation

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