

BOOK REVIEW

A Western Philosopher's Thoughts About Islam

Hüseyin Çaksen

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John Meadows Rodwell (1808-1900), orientalist, became an English clergyman of the Church of England and an Islamic scholar. He served as Rector of St. Peter's, Saffron Hill, London 1836-1843 and Rector of St Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate, London from 1843-1900. His greatest literary achievement was his English version of the Koran published in 1861, in which the Surahs originally ordered chronologically, and is considered by many scholars as the best existing translation, combining accuracy with a faithful representation of the literary garb of the original¹⁻³. Herein, I review Rodwell's thoughts about Islam, the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam) citing from preface section of the book entitled "The Koran: Translated from the Arabic, the Suras Arranged in Chronological Order: With Notes and Index" to attract attention to importance of the Quran. Online version of the book is available free of charge at <https://archive.org/details/koran00unkngoog/page/XIX/mode/1up?view=theater>. Rodwell has started the book with the following paragraphs, quoting from Göethe (in German) and Carlyle on the inside cover page of the book:

"Der Koran... So oft wir auch daran gehen, immer von neuem anwidert, dann aber anzieht, in Erstaunen setzt, und am Ende Verehrung abnöthigh... Dar Styl des Korans ist, seinem Inhalt und Zweck gemass, streng, gross, furchtbar, stellenweis warhaft erhaben... So wird dieses Buch für ewige Zeiten höchst wirksam verbleiben." Göethe. West Osterl. Divan⁴. Its English translation is as follows: "The Quran... As often as we approach it, always disgusted, but then attracted, amazes, and in the end, worship is

needed... The style of the Quran is, in accordance with its content and purpose, severe, great, terrible, in places truly sublime . . . Thus, will this book remain most effective forever." (Quote from Göethe, West Osterl. Divan).

"I confess I can make nothing of the critics in these times, who would accuse Mahomet of deceit preense; of conscious deceit generally, or, perhaps, at all; still more, of living in a mere element of conscious deceit, and writing this Koran as a former and a juggler would have done. Every candid eye, I think, will read the Koran far otherwise than so. It is the confused ferment of a great rude human soul... fervent, earnest... Sincerity, in all senses, seems to me the merit of the Koran" Carlyle⁵.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), a late Ottoman scholar, included Rodwell's following paragraphs about the Quran and Islam under the title of "Testimony of Foreign Philosophers on the Confirmation of the Quran" in a book of İşaratü'l-İ'câz, from the Risale-i Nur Collection, a tafsir of the Quran⁶⁻⁸:

The Koran deserves the highest praise for its conceptions of the Divine nature, in reference to the attributes of Power, Knowledge, and universal Providence and Unity—that its belief and trust in the One God of Heaven and Earth is deep and fervent—yet that at the same time it embodies much of a noble and deep moral earnestness, and sententious oracular wisdom, and has proved that there are elements in it on which mighty nations, and conquering—though not, perhaps, durable—empires can be built up (p. xxiii).

The simple shepherds and wandering Bedouins

Correspondence to: Prof. Hüseyin Çaksen, Divisions of Pediatric Neurology and Genetics, and Behavioral-Developmental Pediatrics, Department of Pediatrics, Faculty of Medicine, Necmettin Erbakan University, Konya, Türkiye. Email: huseyincaksen@hotmail.com

of Arabia, are transformed, as if by a magician's wand, into the founders of empires, the builders of cities, the collectors of more libraries than they at first destroyed, while cities like Fostat, Baghdad, Cordova, and Delhi, attest the power at which Christian Europe trembled. (p. xxiv). In the suppression of their idolatries, in the substitution of the worship of Allah for that of the powers of nature and genii with Him, in the abolition of child murder, in the extinction of manifold superstitious usages, in the reduction of the number of wives to a fixed standard, it was to the Arabians an unquestionable blessing, and an accession, though not in the Christian sense a Revelation, of Truth (p. xxiv).

Rodwell gave brief information about how the scattered parts of the Quran were collected and "assembled", and wrote that the Quran was standardized, and copies of the text were distributed to the relevant units during the caliphate of Othman. In addition, the author noted that the Ayats and Surahs in the Quran were placed in a certain order according to many features such as their content, meaning, length, their forms of poetry and prose, and Meccan or Medina Surahs. The author also emphasized that there is a beautiful, pleasant and surprising harmony between the Ayats of a Surah and among Surahs, and that the Quran can solely be interpreted by the Quran itself.

The contrast between the earlier, middle, and later Suras is very striking and interesting, and will be at once apparent from the arrangement here adopted. In the Suras as far as the 54th, p. 76, we cannot but notice the entire predominance of the poetical element, a deep appreciation (as in Sura xci.) of the beauty of natural objects, brief fragmentary and impassioned utterances, denunciations of woe and punishment, expressed for the most part in lines of extreme brevity. With a change, however, in the position of Muhammad when he openly assumes the office of "public warner," the Suras begin to assume a more prosaic and didactic tone, though the poetical ornament of rhyme is preserved throughout (p. x).

He who at Mecca is the admonisher and persuader, at Medina is the legislator and the warrior, who dictates obedience, and uses other weapons than the pen of the Poet and the Scribe. When business pressed, as at Medina, Poetry makes way for Prose, and although touches of the Poetical

element occasionally break forth, and he has to defend himself up to a very late period against the charge of being merely a Poet, yet this is rarely the case in the Medina Suras; and we are startled by finding obedience to God and the Apostle, God's gifts and the Apostle's, God's pleasure and the Apostle's, spoken of in the same breath, and epithets and attributes elsewhere applied to Allah openly applied to himself as in Sura ix., 118, 129 (pp. x and xi).

It must be borne in mind that the allusions to contemporary minor events, and to the local efforts made by the new religion to gain the ascendant are very few, and often couched in terms so vague and general, that we are forced to interpret the Koran solely by the Koran itself (p. xiii).

Rodwell noted some examples of the Prophet Muhammad's biographers. The author also stated that the Prophet Muhammad worked with a sincere desire to save his countrymen from idolatry and to proclaim the Unity of Allah all his life, that the Arabian state before Muhammad's time was in a state of preparation for a new religion, that the Prophet Muhammad's career is a great example, that the Prophet Muhammad's teachings were true, and that the Prophet Muhammad's followers were victorious.

In all he did and wrote, Muhammad was actuated by a sincere desire to deliver his countrymen from the grossness of its debasing idolatries—that he was urged on by an intense desire to proclaim that great truth of the Unity of the Godhead which had taken full possession of his own soul—that he worked himself up into a belief that he had received a divine call—and that he was carried on by the force of circumstances, and by gradually increasing successes, to believe himself the accredited messenger of Heaven (p. xxi).

It is true that the state of Arabia previous to the time of Muhammad was one of preparedness for a new religion—that the scattered elements were there and wanted only the mind of a master to harmonize and enforce them—and that Islam was, so to speak, a necessity of the time (p. xxii).

Muhammad's career is a wonderful instance of the force and life that resides in him who possesses an intense Faith in God and in the unseen world; and whatever deductions may be made—and they are many and serious—from the noble and truthful in his character, he will always be regarded as one of those who have had that influence over

the faith, morals, and whole earthly life of their fellow-men, which none but a really great man ever did, or can, exercise; and as one of those, whose efforts to propagate some great verity will prosper, both of principle and character (p. xxiii).

The influence of Muhammed's teaching, aided, it is true, by the vast impulse given to it by the victorious arms of his followers, has now lasted for nearly thirteen centuries, and embraces more than one hundred million of our race-more than one-tenth part of the inhabitants of the globe (p. xxiii).

Rodwell wrote that Muslims were successful, and they conquered many countries in the 6th and 7th centuries due to the Quran, that the Quran brought about changes in the customs and beliefs of the people who embraced it, and that Europe owed its development to Muslims in many areas in the Middle Ages.

It is due to the Koran, that the occupants in the sixth century of an arid peninsula, whose poverty was only equaled by their ignorance, become not only the fervent and sincere votaries of a new creed, but, like Amru and many more. They had conquered Persia in the seventh century, the northern coasts of Africa, and a large portion of Spain in the eighth, the Punjab and nearly the whole of India in the ninth (p. xxiv).

While the Koran, which underlays this vast energy and contains the principles which are its springs of action, reflects to a great extent the mixed character of its author, its merits as a code of laws, and as a system of religious teaching, must always be estimated by the changes which it introduced into the customs and beliefs of those who willingly or by compulsion embraced it (p. xxiv).

While every Christian must deplore the overthrow of so many flourishing Eastern churches by the arms of the victorious Muslims, it must not be forgotten that Europe, in the middle ages, owed much of her knowledge of dialectic philosophy, of medicine, and architecture, to Arabian writers, and that Muslims formed the connecting link between the West and the East for the importation of numerous articles of luxury and use (p. xxiv).

Rodwell reported some incorrect information that is contrary to basic Islamic teachings in preface section of the book as follows: Rodwell wrote that all the Surahs in the Quran was written by the

Prophet Mohammad (SAW) for hearers but not for readers and the book included imperfect sentences (p. xi) and that Muhammad derived many of his notions concerning Christianity from Gnosticism (p. xvii). He also said that it is just possible that fragments of the Old or New Testament may have reached him through Chadijah or Waraka, or other Meccan Christians, possessing MSS (manuscripts) of the sacred volume (p. xviii). And it is equally certain, that all the information received by Muhammad was embellished and recast in his own mind and with his own words. The longer narratives were, probably, elaborated in his leisure hours, while the shorter verses, each claiming to be a sign or miracle, were promulgated as occasion required them (pp. xx and xxi). The Quran is the word of Allah and has been sent to all humanity. It was sent to the last Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Allah through Jibrail (or Jibril), one of the great angels. It was conveyed from the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to us by means of tawatur, with a certainty that no one could object to it (the meaning of tawatur is that it is the reporting of a news by people who cannot be united on a false statement and who are always trusted). Even a letter of the Quran has not changed and has not been changed until today. It is guaranteed by Allah that it will be preserved intact until the Day of Judgment. The Quran is the ultimate universal and a comprehensive book that includes the basic principles of all ancient revelations. The Quran preserves the truths in the old Holy books by correcting them^{9,10}. Based on these the Islamic teachings, it is too clear that Rodwell's above thoughts were not correct.

In conclusion, although Rodwell's English version of the Quran is one of the best existing translations, combining accuracy with a faithful, the preface section of the book included some incorrect information. Therefore, I believe that preface section of the book should be carefully reviewed by Islamic scholars before publication of new editions of the book.

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