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Modernity and the Muslim World

Mohammed Akram Gill
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In the West many scientists and theologians have been talking to each other trying to reach some rapprochement for about forty years. Some scientists even declare that while they are devout Christians their faith does not interfere with their scientific work. Of course others such as Richard Dawkins contend that there can never be any common ground between science and religion and many theologians would agree that the naturalistic claims of science cannot be reconciled with the supernatural foundations of religion.

As Mohammad Akram Gill points out in his sometimes astute but often repetitious and tedious little book Islam by its very nature precludes any serious conversation with science. Thus observes Gill—a scientist who earned a Ph.D. in hydraulics from the University of London (UK) and has published his engineering research papers in several internationally refereed journals—science has not flourished in Islam or in Islamic countries since the Middle Ages because of that religion's dogmatic assertion that all ideas must come from the Quran.

In a set of fourteen collected essays—all but one of which have been previously published—Gill probes the reasons that Islam has not embraced modernity. In his opening essay he suggests some of the reasons why a conversation between science and religion is impossible in the Muslim world. "The Islamic world is intellectually dominated by theologians and metaphysicians…there is no reputable scientist in the Muslim world that underlines the fundamental importance of science for the Muslim world."

Criticism of Islam says Gill also brings charges of blasphemy and sometimes sentences of death. "The Muslim critics are afraid to raise critical issues orally and in print. They are afraid that they might be accused of blasphemy and treated harshly. Religious criticism is not tolerated in the Muslim world-period."

In spite of the Muslim world's failure to embrace the achievements of science in the modern world Islam wasn't always opposed to science. As Gill so helpfully points out science and philosophy flourished in the Islamic world from the Middle Ages until the mid-sixteenth century. Astronomers physicists and mathematicians such as Ibn-al-Shatir al-Razi Ibn-al-Sina and Ibn-al-Rushd were household names in the West.

Gill introduces us much too briefly to a contemporary Muslim scientist Abdus Salam who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1979. Gill uses Salam's career—he was treated harshly in his native Pakistan and founded the International Center for Theoretical Physics in Italy in hopes of allowing Third World scientists a place to do research would aid their native countries—as a case study of the failure of the relationship between modernity and Islam.

Although Gill usefully offers reasons why science and Islam do not presently converse he offers no helpful conclusions or suggestions about how the Muslim world might embrace modernity. The occasional nature of Gill's essays limits their value as a tool for dialogue but the essays do usefully define the contours of Islam's present view of the modern world.

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