Islam and Christianity

Islam and Christianity: A Review Article by Ali Quli Qara'i

The reviewer `Ali Quli Qara'i is the editor of Al-Tawhid (English). Soon after the Islamic Revolution of Iran he brought out a monthly journal in English, The Message of Peace, from Qum. Montgomery Watt is one of the leading living Orientalists, who has written and compiled a large number of books on various aspects of Islam, Muslim history and Islamic thought.

Islam and Christianity Today-A Contribution To Dialogue, W. Montgomery Watt London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983; pp. 157; $ 8.95

Islam and Christianity Today is the rather vague title of a book which consists of the "inner dialogue" of an Orientalist who has been engaged in the study of Islam (mainly Sunnite) for almost forty years. His study and appreciation of Islam caused him to ask searching questions about his own beliefs as a Christian.

W. Montgomery Watt has a sympathetic regard and respect for Islam and presumably for all religions. "All religions are true," he seems to declare with Gandhian generosity, though he finds Christianity more congenial and, implicitly, "truer," though he may not say it explicitly in the interest of the "outer dialogue" with Muslims. In any case, he is not, apparently, a secular student of religion. Consequently his inner dialogue originates from an effort to defend his religious consciousness in the midst of the West's predominantly secular (the modern epithet for "pagan") scientific culture.

This somewhat inconclusive defence is undertaken in the second chapter of the book entitled, "The Affirmation of Religious Truth Against Scientism." Watt is conscious that by undertaking this exercise he is also doing some service to his Muslim friends, the study of whose religion has been the ground for his expertise. He says, "The meeting of Islam and Christianity at the present time takes place in a situation in which both... are subject to attack from many quarters; and the Christian who defends his own beliefs against such attacks find that he is at the same time defending some of the beliefs of his Muslim friend". (p. 6).

In this chapter Watt, basing his argument on the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John Macmurray, Michael Polanyi and Peter Berger-as he himself acknowledges-undertakes the defence of religion. If not his conceptual structure, the conclusions he reaches are basically close to those of the pragmatists.

After a somewhat sociologi¬cal, philosophical dialogue, which winds through such notions as the sociological theory of the social construction of reality advanced by Berger and Luckmann,

a discussion of the common-sense view of the world, the correspondence and coherence theories of truth, and the centrality of action, it finally lands in the precincts of pragmatism¬though without making any undue fuss of it-with the conclusion: "The satisfactory quality of life claimed for the members of religious community normally includes an adequate level of material well-being and harmonious social relationships, but the ultimate criterion of satisfactoriness is that life should be meaningful" (p. 21).

Though the sufferings and sacrifices of some for the cause of faith are a difficult problem from the viewpoint of a pragmatic justification of religion, "it does not disprove the contention that true religious belief is accompanied by a more satisfactory quality of life" (p. 21). Watt defends religion and religious pluralism in one breath by asserting that, "all the great religions over a period of centuries have enabled vast number of people to lead a satisfactory life" (p. 22).

Either Watt is a pragmatist and does not need deeper spiritual reasons for confirmation of the truth of religion, or since his audience is the modern Western educated man, he is forced to base his `defence' on pragmatic grounds. The satisfaction and meaning obtained from various religions by their followers do not mean "that each statement of each religion is to be regarded as true in isolation, but that the symbolic system of each religion, taken as a whole, presents a view of reality which is sound in many or most relevant aspects". (p. 22)

The Issue of Religious Pluralism Explored

This belief provides the grounds for religious pluralism taken for granted by Watt, but it swiftly runs into obvious difficulties. What is a satisfactory life? What is the criterion of a meaningful life? How should one know for certain what the "relevant aspects" are? Is the aim of religion deliverance or satisfaction?

Is it sufficient to lead a satisfactory life to have the surety of salvation? Does it not amount to making complaisance the test of truth? Moreover, even if one were able to identify most of the "relevant aspects," is it sufficient for one's salvation? A similar criterion would not be applicable in case of physical well-being. Of course, a physician may not ignore the serious condition of heart disease for the reason that many or most bodily organs are functioning normally. A primary condition of perfect health is that not most but all organs must function normally and perfectly.

The advocates of religious pluralism, on the basis of the contention that most religions contain elements of truth and no religion the entire truth, preach religious complaisance. Such complaisance may serve the worthy purpose of religious tolerance but does no service to religious truth. If religiosity in the highest sense is the passion for unadulterated truth in its totality and entirety, its purpose is by no means served by subjective and egocentric criteria,

and the terms like "satisfaction" and "meaning" fall short of desired objective. In this light one may say that for Watt the truth of religion is established statistically. With reference to Islam and Christianity he says: "In the particular cases of Islam and Christianity to say that they are verified in general implies accepting their central doctrines as true" (p. 22). These words, surprisingly similar to the definition of the `verification theory of meaning' of the modern logical positivists, reveal Watt's inclination towards positivistic empirical approach to religion. However, Watt is conscious of the difficulties of reconciliation between the two sets of doctrines, when he says: "Also included among the doctrines to be accepted because of this verification must be the Islamic doctrine of the prophethood of Muhammad and the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus. Superficially neither of these is acceptable to the other religion but, when the doctrines are looked at more closely, the reader will probably find that the divergences are lesser than they appeared at first sight".(p. 23)

Watt proposes to bridge this doctrinal gap (a bridging which apparently amounts to making Muslims believe in the divinity of Jesus (A) and inducing the Christians to agree to recognize Muhammad (S) as a true prophet, which in turn amounts to negation of Christ's divinity) by undertaking an aerial journey over the chasm on the magic carpet of his abstract analysis of symbolic uses of language. Accordingly the next subheading in this chapter is "Symbolic Language as an Expression of Reality.

" He goes about proving that symbolic usage of words is common in the language of daily use also, in science, as well as in poetry. It leads him to conclude that "the fact that in non-religious matters symbolic language does not imply unreality suggests that, the same should be true in religious assertions" (p. 28). In the same chapter, while discussing symbolic uses in the Bible and the Quran, he refers to the issue of the use of anthropomorphic terms in the Quran with relation to God.

After mentioning the stand of Sunni theologians that "the anthropomorphic terms applied to God were to be under¬stood bi-la kayf, `without (specifying) how' or `amodally', that is, without asking whether they were literal or metaphorical," concludes that " this is an entirely rational approach to the problem, and one of great subtlety... this attitude might be called one of `sophisticated naivety' " (p. 30). Watt is aware that a similar kind of `sophisticated naivety' is required for belief in many Christian doctrines.

An educates Westerner must perhaps have the satisfaction of being sophisticated a all costs. Watt does not notice that what he calls `sophisticated naivety is just an intellectual way of saying "shut up." Some knowledge of Shiite kalam might have saved him from much credulity in this regard Nevertheless, it is a pity that a learned defendant of religion like Wati should be

so ever ready to bargain healthy rationality for any kind of `naivety', no matter how much its `sophistication'.

Furthermore, it does not suit the purpose of a world-view, in the words of Watt, as a "total view of reality" into which must "fit all the truth in the various sciences. Watt does not seem to have understood well the spiritual meaning or function of prayer when he carelessly remarks that "Many Christians, I believe, show this sophisticated naivety when they engage in prayer (p. 31). Muslims also pray, and perhaps as naively according to Watt. Though he needs not mention them and is careful to avoid any possible misunderstandings in the interest of the dialogue; the praying Christian, he seems to guess, will not take offence at `naivety' as long as it is accompanied with `sophistication'.

A Discussion on the Assumptions of Scientism

The rest of the chapter is devoted to refutation of some assumptions of scientism: " (1) that the objects studied by the sciences are the sole reality; (2) that the account of the original form of a thing shows what it really is; (3) that analysis of a thing into parts shows what it really is" (p. 31). Watt, wisely without going into philosophical abstrusities, points out that there is more to reality than atoms and molecules.

He points out the extreme complexity-if not the utter absurdity-of any attempt to reduce such statements as `Alan kicked the goal which won the cup for the Blues' into its physio-chemical constituents. His healthy common-sense, which is unaffected by any philosophical or scientific myopia, allows him to conclude without wasting time or ink that "meanings are just as real as molecules, since they are part of the reality in response to which we act.

" With a lesser dexterity he disposes of the reductionist fallacy of trying to assess things by their origins: "The philosophy of a great thinker is not just the intellectual outpourings of a neurotic child, but has to be judged by the philosophical quality of his mature publications and not by his infantile tendencies" (p. 37). Of course, Mr. Watt is not implying that the thought of lesser thinkers may be judged that way. At the end of the chapter he deals with the "serious and difficult question of the relationship of living things and human beings in particular to the physio-chemical basis of their life." However, "in this somewhat technical matter it seems best" for him "not to attempt any independent discussion.

" Accordingly, he resorts to quotations from Polanyi to prove his belief in "the rule that in normal functioning the higher controls the lower." With reference to the Gestalt theory which suggests an alternative opposed to that of reductionism, he points out that "different patterns may be found in the same complex object." Unexpectedly, this matter is related by him to the

issue of religious pluralism (and later in the book to historiography) to speculate that, At some primitive period people in a certain region of the earth discovered certain patterns in the world around them, and made use of these patterns in working out a general world-view. In other regions other people used slightly different patterns. In the course of time the great world religions worked out their world-views in terms of different categories of fundamental patterns; and this makes communication and `dialogue' between them a matter of great difficulty". (p. 42)

One wonders about the role of God in the midst of this religious chaos. The textual criticism of the Bible may have forced many Christians to adopt a humbler opinion of their scriptures; but it is less than humility to expect others, the Muslims in this case, to participate in the chorus of the advocates of pluralism. For the Muslim the diversity of religions is not derived from discovery or evolution of patterns by peoples in various regions of the world but from men's insolence against one another. The path of God is not a network of zigzags but a straight path: Mankind were one nation, and God sent unto them prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and He sent down with them the Scripture with the truth, that it might judge between mankind concerning that wherein they differed concerning it. And only those unto whom (the Scripture) was given differed concerning it, after clear proofs had come unto them, being insolent one to another. Then God guided those who believed to the Truth, touching which they (were at variance, by His leave; and God guides whomsoever He will to a straight path. (2:213

Common Points: Islam and Christianity

The author devotes the six remaining chapters of the book to a study of some common points between Islam and Christianity. They are : "The Names and Attributes of God;" "Scripture as the Word of God;" "God the Creator;" "God as the Lord of History;" and "Humanity in Relation to God." In "The Names and Attributes of God", Watt remarks that "to say that Muslims worship Allah and Christians worship God is ....like saying that the Germans worship Gott and the French Dieu." He points out that "there are several million Arabic speaking Christians in Egypt, the Lebanon and elsewhere who have no other word for God than Allah. " Though the theological conceptions of God differ between Jews, Muslims and Christians, "worship and service is a relation to a Being, not to a conception; and Jews, Christians and Muslims, though their conceptions differ, worship the same Being".(p. 46) We may admit what Watt says only with certain qualifications. Firstly, there are two concepts involved in the idea `worship of God.' The Muslims differ with the Christians not only in the conception of `God' (which includes the ideas of Trinity, incarnation and divinity of Christ), but also in the

conception of what constitutes `worship'.

The Arabic verbs `abada, ya'budu, and the noun `ibadah for worship, are used in the Quran in the sense of service. Though God is the Lord, the Master and Sustainer (al-Rabb) of all creatures and they are His `ibad (slaves, servants, creatures), the good servants of God, the `ibad Allah proper, are referred to with additional epithets such as mu'minun (believing), mukhlisun (sincere), salihun (righteous), shakur (grateful), munib (penitent), or simply as 'ibadi (My servants) in the Quran. Therefore, `ibadah or `worship' is man's service of God as his Master and Lord, and includes the idea of obedience.

The English term `worship' conveys only a devotional sense, and does not imply obedience to God's legal and ethical commands. It is, moreover, in the sense of service not merely of devotion that the Quran prohibits the `ibadah of the Satan (36:60) or the non-God or taghut (39:17), where it is entirely independent of the ritualistic sense of devotion. The Christian `service' is also loaded with ritualistic and devotional connota¬tion. Therefore, to say that all who believe in God-in the common religious sense-or worship Him-in the sense of prayer and devotional rituals-do not necessarily do the `ibadah of God, in the Islamic sense. `Ibadah refers to the realization of the `abd-Rabb, (slave-Master, servant¬Lord) relationship in one's life. Therefore, in the Islamic sense a `worshipper' of God is one who serves Him and obeys Him and carries out His Will as given through the revelation. Accordingly, it is highly inaccurate to say that Jews, Christians and Muslims "worship the same God." The expression can be accepted only as a very crude approximation on the level of daily usage. The best way out seems to be that we may continue to use the terms `God' and `worship' for `Allah' and "ibadah' and leave it to God to judge who worships Him in actuality and how well.

In the same chapter while discussing the "Oneness or Unicity" of God, Watt remarks: Christians also believe in the unicity of God [not the unity], one of their main statements of belief, the Nicene Creed, opening with the words, `I believe in one God.' At the same time, however, they also believe that God is in some way threefold. The doctrine of the Trinity, as it is called, is subtle and abstruse, and most ordinary Christians simply accept it without being able to explain it fully". (p. 49)

The doctrine of the Trinity is a necessary corollary of the belief in divinity of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Of the two only divinity of Christ is of greater emotional and doctrinal significance for the Christians. Islam rejects incarnation, whether in the case of Jesus or someone else. The Creator cannot be incarnated in a creature, though all creatures manifest His Creativity, Mastery and Sovereignty. According to Islam, the Essence of God is free of distinctions and divisions.

It is, from the Islamic viewpoint, no more than play of words to say that most Christians believe in three hypostases in the Divine Essence not three separate divine entities. It does not matter whether three different things are packed separately on the level of conception as `gods,' or whether all three are put inside one package labelled `God'. As long as we have a Son distinct from the Father as two different essences with a peculiar relationship, the unity of or the unicity of Godhead is like an external and conventional unity of a triumvirate, not an internal and essential unity.

Moreover, the New Testaments, while they clearly support the idea of Christ's incarnation, also strongly imply that the `Father' is somewhat more divine than the `Son', who says to the former `yet not what I want, but what you want' (Matthew 27). The Father has greater authority and in fact he is more often referred to as being the `God' who sent `his only Son' into the world to forgive sins of men. The doctrine of Trinity was framed after the belief in Christ's incarnation had become fixed among a large group of Christians.

The Church had to shield itself from the blames of polytheism while preserving the divinity of Christ intact; hence the `sophisticated incoherence' of the Nicene Creed. But the belief in Christ being the Son of God had become so prevalent in Christendom, and Christianity had become so irrevocably saddled with the idea of his divinity that the doctrine of three hypostases (lit. substances) was the best that theological expertise could achieve. There is some `sophisticated naivety' in this statement of Watt when he says:

It is commonly thought that the Quran criticizes the doctrine of the Trinity, but this is not necessarily so. Any statement about the matter requires to be carefully qualified. One of the verses dealing with the points is 5:73: `disbelieved have those who say God is the third of three; there is no deity except one deity'.

Taken literally this verse is criticizing belief in three gods, not in three hypostases; and from a Christian point of view belief in three gods is a heresy, tritheism. Throughout the centuries there have probably been simple-minded and badly instructed Christians whose effective belief may in fact have been tritheism, and there may well have been some such people in Arabia in Muhammad's times. In so far as this is so and the Quran is attacking tritheism, it is attacking a Christian heresy and orthodox Christians would agree with its criticisms (p. 50).

Watt here has tried to cast doubt on the Quranic disapproval of the doctrine of Trinity. However, even if it were possible to cast (though unjustifiably) any doubt on the Quran's rejection of Trinity, it is impossible to question the Quran's repeated rejection of the divinity of Christ and his incarnation (see the Quran, 4:172, 5:17, 5:72, 5:75, 9:30, 3:59, 4:171, 5:116). Moreover, if we view the Old Testaments, the New Testaments and the Quran as scriptures

related to one religious tradition (which Watt is inclined to admit), it is somewhat difficult to accept that God should have maintained complete silence about a Son for two thousand years ago in the first instance,

and again forgets that He had sent His son into the world six hundred years after sending him. It is somewhat difficult to accept that God should have stressed upon His Unity in His teachings conveyed to all prophets from Noah to Abraham and up to Moses, and then from Moses to John the Baptist, and then should become a Trinity for sometime, and then should disavow His Trinity in the Book revealed to Prophet Muhammad (S).

The Muslims may not but consider the Christian doctrine of Trinity but as a relapse into polytheism on the part of the Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ. The Jews, as the Old Testament bears testimony, were prone to relapse into polytheism and idolatry throughout their national history. However the relatively firm establishment of monotheism by the time of Jesus precluded any overt regression into idolatrous and polytheistic beliefs. Perhaps the limited polytheism disguised in the doctrine of Trinity was all that was possible for the polytheistic temperament to achieve within the monotheistic climate of the Hebrew culture, which was already subject to the stresses imposed by the pagan Romans' cultural, political, and religious influences.

Watt is aware of the responsibility inherent in belief (p. 135), which is parallel or even prior to the responsibility for one's actions, and is upheld in the Islamic and Christian teachings. This is because our world-views, irrespective of whether we are theists or atheists, play a fundamental role in the organization of our entire scheme of life. Beliefs are inherited by children from parents or "from the view of reality current in the social milieu," together with other behavioural patterns, and one is, therefore, responsible at least partially for how the future generations shall believe, live and act.

In order to judge any belief or act we must also take into consideration the consequences for the entire humanity if such a belief were held and practised world-wide by all human beings. If one were to apply Watt's pragmatic criterion to the Christian belief in Trinity and speculate what would be the consequences for the entire mankind if the belief in the incarnation of Christ had not become prevalent among Christians-a belief which resulted, not to speak of the Jew's alienation from Christ, in the denial of the prophethood of Muhammad (S) by millions of human beings since the period following Christ to the present day, and deprived them of the spiritual, intellectual and moral benefits of Islam, not to speak about the centuries of distrust if not hostility it has caused between two major sections of mankind-one may wonder about the contribu¬tion it might have made to the satisfactoriness of human life" on this planet. Perhaps

it could have saved mankind from the crucial loss of meaning which has assumed cosmic .dimensions in the modern world for some decades

Attributes and Names of God

In the same chapter, while discussing the Attributes and Names of God, Watt remarks: So far as names and words go there would seem to be little difference between Islam and Christianity. Nevertheless, many Christians would claim that God as conceived by Christians is more loving than God as conceived by Muslims. For Christians, He is not merely benevolent towards those who obey and love Him, but He is like a shepherd who goes out to look for and rescue sheep that have gone astray ....Many items of news in recent years have given Westerners the impression that Muslims are sterner and more rigorous in their punishment of offenders. Undoubtedly, however, there are many other Muslims whose attitudes are much more liberal.(p. 53)

Watt's attitude is fairer than that of some Orientalists and scholars of Semitic religions who regard the Old Testament and the Quranic conceptions of God as being sterner or less loving than the Christian conception'. Watt is willing to admit that there is "little difference" between the Islamic and Christian conceptions "so far as names and words go'." However, there is something true in the statement that the Christian conception projects God as being more loving and lenient in comparison with the Jewish and Islamic notions. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the emphasis on love,

more than in the Gospels, is found in Paul's letters; secondly, the absence of any system of legislation in Christianity comparable to the Mosaic Law or the Islamic Shari'ah3. God in the popular Christian conception is no more the authoritative lawgiver that He is in the Quran and the Torah. In the Christian concep¬tion, `one is put right with God' solely through faith in God and Jesus Christ. Voluntary morality substitutes the compulsory Divine Law. God, to Paul and his followers, no longer seems to make any of the following demands: Whoever hits his father or his mother is to be put to death. Whoever kidnaps a man, either to sell him or to keep him as a slave, is to be put to death. Whoever curses his father or his mother, is to be put to death. Whenever a man gets angry and deliberately kills another man, he is to be put to death, even if he has run to My altar of safety (Exodus 21:14-17). If a thief is caught breaking into a house at night and is killed, the one who killed him is not guilty of murder (Exodus 22:4). Put to death any woman who practises magic. Put to death any man who has sexual relations with an animal. Condemn to death anyone who offers sacrifices to any god except Me, the Lord (Exodus 22:18-20). If a man is caught having

intercourse with another man's wife, both of them are to be put to death (Deut. 22:22). Whoever does not keep it (the Sabbath), but works on that day, is to be put to death (Exodus 31:14).

Similarly, Christianity is not `encumbered' with the laws regarding qisas, and hudud as in Islam. This banishment of Law from the predominant Christian religion which has survived until today, reduces God, na'udhu billdh, to an easygoing, indulgent and negligent sovereign who is no longer bothered about how men may regulate their lives and social affairs, as long as they have faith in Him and His Son, whose death on the cross exempts the believers from the jurisdiction of the earlier Law given to Moses. To the Muslim it appears that the Christian or rather the Pauline emphasis on love is a plea to compensate the guilt caused by the rejection of Mosaic Law in the interest of Paul's ambition for proselyting among the Gentiles. The Mosaic Law, with its all ¬embracing nature covering all the individual and social affairs, would have reduced the acceptability of the Christian doctrine for the Gentiles used to liberal life styles.

Watt is referring to the much publicized cases of-implementation of the Islamic penal laws in the latter part of his above-quoted state¬ment. When he refers to the "many other Muslims whose attitudes are much more liberal", he is indeed referring to the "moderate" Muslims who, like Paul, consider religion as voluntary ethics and a matter of individual's inner faith that would not tolerate the Law of the Shari'ah to invade all spheres of individual and social life. While they are delighted with the abstract idea of loving Gad and all mankind and the rest of creation, they are put off by any suggestion that God should be obeyed (at least as much as their office's regulations or the traffic rules) and not merely loved.

They are liberal indeed in the sense that they liberally appropriate all control over their individual lives or the affairs of the society to themselves. Faith and love, they are convinced, are sufficient to satisfy and placate God, and compensate for their rejection of the Law, without which, they are certain, it is possible to regulate individual life and socio-political affairs of their society `satisfactorily.'

Actually in a sense Watt's present work is aimed to reassure and perhaps guide these Muslim liberals in the light of the Christian experience, as the note on the book's flap candidly suggests:

In the Islamic world today there are many liberal-minded Muslims who feel threatened by their own fundamentalists, and who are likely to see in the positions adopted and defended in this book a possible way forward for themselves.

Scriptures as the Word of God

In the fourth chapter of the book "Scriptures as the Word of God", writing on the revealed law, Watt admits that "Jesus accepted the Mosaic Law" (p. 72). In the same paragraph earlier, he somewhat misleadingly states that "Christians accepted the commands given by God to Moses, of which the main ones are those in the Ten Command¬ments." The Ten Commandments constitute a prelude to the detailed text of Mosaic Law as stated in several books of the Pentateuch. This statement may mislead many Muslim readers who are not well-acquainted with the Christian attitude towards Mosaic Law. Watt, without making any reference to the obvious role of Paul and his followers in dissociating Christianity from the Mosaic Law, states:

Unlike the early Muslims the early Christians did not constitute a political entity or state, and so they had no responsibility for framing or administering laws. What they found, however, especially those of them who lived outside Palestine, was that in the Roman empire there was a system of law owing nothing to revelation, and yet roughly in accordance with the ethico-legal parts of the Mosaic law. When the Roman empire became officially Christian in the early fourth century, it already had a system of law which was in general acceptable to Christians, and there was no need to create a new system of law based solely on the Mosaic law as modified by the teaching of Jesus.

Living in the Roman empire made it clear to Christians that sound human reason, apart from revelation, could reach a satisfactory system of law. Thus in medieval Christendom and in modern Western Christendom until the present century, although the laws of the various states were expected to be in accordance with biblical teaching, it was not considered necessary to show how a particular law was derived from scriptural texts (p. 73).

The 'deliberate neglect of Mosaic Law by early Christianity, or rather the majority sects of Christians, contrasts sharply with the attitude of Jesus Christ himself who, in the words of Watt, "criticized certain aspects of its contemporary application, notably the attaching of great importance to ritual matters and the like and the comparative neglect of some of the main ethico-legal conceptions." The Gospel of Matthew reports about Jesus' attack on the Hebrew teachers of the Law for their hypocrisy. In the course of his discourse, Jesus says:

You hypocrites! You give to God a tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practise, without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23:23)

Jesus attacks the partial and selective practice of the Law by the Jewish priests, who ignored the teachings of paramount social significance such as justice, honesty and mercy. His words are compa¬rable to a similar condemnation of the ahl al-hitdb, the Jews in particular, by the

Quran:

... What, do you believe in part of the Book, and disbelieve in part? What shall be the recompense of those of you who do that, but degradation in the present life, and on the Day of Resurrection to be returned unto the most terrible chastisement? .... (2:85)

If, according to Watt, the Christians "did not constitute a political entity or state" in the beginning, neither did the non-Christian Jews, who were politically and culturally under the Roman domination. It is much of naivety on the part of Watt to expect the reader to be gullible enough to believe that "within the Roman empire there was a system of law... roughly in accordance with the ethico-legal parts of the Mosaic Law.

" The fact is that Christianity was so much liberalized and secularized by the- third century by its predominant sect-as is the case today with the `Islam' of the Westernized Muslim intelligentsia and statesmen-and so much cut off from the practice of the Mosaic Law that it did not matter how roughly the Roman law agreed with the law given by God to Moses. The Christians readily adopted the ways of Roman society and "when the Roman empire became officially Christian in the early fourth century, it already had a system of law which was in general acceptable to Ghistians; end there was no need to create a new system of law based on the Mosaic Law."

The Sunni and Shah-jurists accept, with some difference, the role of reason in derivation 'of the `rules `of the Shari'ah; but to consider reason as a substitute for revelation (or as Watt cleverly states, "as a source parallel to revelation") would be a flagrant infringement of the explicit text of the Quran:

And whoever does not give a ruling according to what God has revealed¬ they are the unbelievers. (5:44) It is not for any believer, man or woman, 'When God and His Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in their affair. Whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger has gone astray in manifest error. (33:36)

Reason in Islamic jurisprudence is usually applied as a tool only in no case considered to be parallel to the Quran and the Sunnah. Only when there is no guide-line offered by the Quran and the Sunnah the reason can assume an independent parallel role. Such instances are neutral to the Shari'ah. It would be naivety to expect the Islamic jurist worth his name to take the Shari'ah as lightly and nonchalantly as Pauline Christianity treated the Mosaic law. In Islam, legislation of any laws conflicting with the Shari'ah is a kind of apostasy and shirk (poly-theism). It is this kind of departure from the revealed law on behalf of the Jewish doctors and Christian priesthood that the Quran disapproves in the following verse, likening their behaviour to polytheism:

They (the Jews and the Christians) have taken their rabbis and their monks-as lords apart from God .... (9:31)

Watt knows well this difference between- Muslim and -Christian attitudes, as he remarks:

The contrast between the Islamic belief: that all laws should be based, on God's commands and the Christian readiness to accept sound human reason as a source of law parallel to revelation is one-of the greatest differences between the two religions, and raises the _question whether in' the future it will be possible for Muslims to cooperate in the field of law with Christians; or at least to have some degree of mutual understanding (p74')

However, no man of sound reason, who has also read the Pentateuch, will accept Watt's . remark which indirectly casts doubts upon the death penalties legislated in the Mosaic Law-

Even if it is accepted that the commands are God's commands, it is proper to ask whether human beings have correctly understood the fundamental principles implicit in them. One of the Ten Commandments is `you shall not kill', and this may be said to inculcate the fundamental principle of `respect for life'. What may be asked, however, is whether this command forbids the judicial execution of criminals. For nearly twenty centuries most Christians have agreed that it does not; but that appears to be a human interpretation of the command.(p. 76)

Watt's attitude exemplifies the nonchalant attitude of most Christians towards the revelation and the Law of the Old Testaments, an attitude which may not be emulated by any Muslim jurisprudent.

In general, the Christian scholars of Islam have striven to diminish the Muslim's respect for his law and scriptures. Under the heading "The human element in revelation," Watt takes some pains to prove that there is `some human element' also in the Quran. While as a Christian he apparently believes that God may become incarnate in a man born of a woman, eat, drink, speak, move about and die, it is interesting to see him making the following remark about the Muslim belief that the Quran constitutes the speech of God. He says:

There is something paradoxical in the idea that written or spoken words may be the word or speech of God. Because God is eternal and transcendent He can be known to man only in so far as He reveals Himself to man. (p. 61)

The textual criticism of the Bible has deflated the traditional Christian views about the `Divine' origin of the books of the Old and New Testaments. Some Western scholars of Islam have also taken great pains to prove that discrepancies, as are replete in the Bible, exist also in the Holy Quran. Others have tried to call its literary excellence in question. Arther J. Arberry refers to the Quran's literary critics as men "ambitious to measure the ocean of prophetic eloquence

with the thimble of pedestrian analysis.

" One of the allegations made by such critics has been in relation to the Quranic story of Mary, Jesus' mother, in which she is addressed reproachfully as `sister of Aaron' (19:28) by the people who accuse her of adultery. The critics allege that the Quran confuses between Mary, Jesus' mother, and the sister of Aaron, Moses' brother, of the same name. The Quran is perfectly clear about its historical perspective from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, and from Moses to the time of Christ.

This fact is obvious to any reader of the Quran. It is nothing less than deliberate malice on the Orientalists' part to make such absurd allegations against the Quran. Also, it is naivety on Watt's behalf to use it to inculcate doubt about the irrefutably firm Islamic belief born out by the Quran and reliable hadith that Jesus did not die upon the cross'. This is what Watt says:

... There is a slight mathematical mistake in the Bible, where it speaks of a large circular basin, called a `sea' which is ten cubits across and thirty cubits round (2 Chronicles 4.2); actually a circle which is ten units in diameter has a circumference of over thirty-one units. Presumably the people for whom this was written were accustomed to work with this low degree of accuracy, and it was not part of the purpose of scripture to change their outlook in such matters.

In similar fashion, some of the verses in which Western scholars have alleged that the Quran has made mistakes, should be regarded as being expressed in terms of mistaken views current among the people of Mecca and Medina. Examples are the address to Mary, mother of Jesus, as `sister of Aaron', and the apparent denial of the crucifixion of Jesus (4:157). It is probable that there were people in Arabia who had such ideas, and it was not part of the purpose of revelation to correct them.

With regard to the crucifix¬ion it is known that there were certain Christian heretics, called Gnostics, who denied that Jesus died on the cross. The primary purpose of S. 4:157 appears to be not to deny the death as such, but to deny that the bringing about of his death by the Jews was triumph for them (a point with which Christians could agree). (p. 63) .

God The Creator

In the fifth chapter entitled "God the Creator", Watt deals with the belief that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and handles the `not easy task' of understanding it `in the light of what we know about the universe.' Since there is no established or even emergent cosmology capable of reconciling religious beliefs about the relation of God to the universe with the results of science, he takes upon himself the task of providing "the rudiments of a

philosophical cosmology by drawing on ideas from such thinkers as Polanyi and Teilhard de Chardin" (p. 79).

He implicitly accepts the Marxian views on the relation of the individual to society and holds that "persons cannot be persons except through and in a society, they cannot act except in accordance with the meanings implicit in the world-view of the society." Accordingly, Watt's generous attempt to provide Christians and Muslims with a philosophical cosmology is also based firmly upon the secular Western world view which he shares with other Westerners. For him the unity of the human race is a potential unity, `and that this unity is in the process of being realized' presumably through world-wide acceptance of the secular Western world-view, which according to him "is bound to be universally accepted before long by all educated persons." (p. 83) Watt despite his earlier feeble protest against scientism is, visibly, perfectly at home with the secular Western world-view and his suggested cosmology which deals with religious conceptions is aimed at proposing only minor modifications to it so as to incorporate religious beliefs in the secular world-outlook.

In this cosmological scheme, God is an `orientation' in matter which, if we may say, develops in an evolutionary fashion from the simplicity of the `geosphere' and ` biosphere' to the complexities of the nousphere' and `theiosphere'. God is reduced in it, though implicitly, to a mode of matter. Watt only vaguely understands the mathematical notion of boundary conditions or constraints, and follows Polanyi in the claim that "higher-level entities somehow impose boundary conditions on lower-level entities." In his suggested cosmology, the cosmic process is controlled by (a) setting of boundary conditions, and (b) the presence in matter of an orientation, also spoken of as `radial energy' [a concept taken from Teilhard]. The suggestion that first springs to mind is that it is God who sets the boundary conditions, and He is somewhat identified with the orientation in matter, or at least works through it. (p. 93) .... To say that it is God who sets the boundary conditions for the universe [presumably its laws] and who is present in the constituents of the universe as an orientation covers the main assertions of the scriptures. (p. 94)

God's immanence and His transcendence are reduced to two different modes of matter: The boundary conditions might be described as the more explicit and external form of the implicit and internal orientation. As applied to God, this latter symbol expresses His immanence, the other His transcendence. Watt's metaphysics makes theology an appendage of physics and biology, and incorporates God into the universe with results not much different from Spinozistic pantheism.

But how is a believer in the God of the scriptures to react to this inane and abstract conception

of the Deity rehabilitated in the secular Western world-view? Watt anticipates the question and readily prescribes `sophisticated naivety' once again:

The devout believer may well ask: How can I worship an orientation or a setter of boundary conditions? The question is a perfectly proper one, and the answer is simple. The believer must keep in mind what has already been said about `sophisticated naivety'. By all means he may - indeed he must¬ go on using the familiar scriptural terms with naive simplicity [i.e. God and Creator for Orientation and Setter of boundary conditions]. (p. 95) He accepts evolution, namely, that "Homo sapiens is descended from `lower' forms of life," as a scientific fact, man being the best result so far obtained by the `orientation':

Certainly God created man, but has brought him into existence by controlling the direction of the evolutionary process. God is not to be thought of as having had some kind of blueprint of human nature; rather humanity is the highest example so far of that towards which the immanent orientation is tending.(p. 95)

Since there is no room in the Western secular world-view for miracles and God's `interference with the laws of nature,' Watt tries to explain away biblical miracles related to Noah, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus as allegories, imitations of earlier `models' or imaginative distor¬tions of perfectly natural events.

The story of Adam and Eve, since it does not fit with the theory of evolution, is for him a "folk-myth". The Virgin Birth of Jesus and his resurrection, though posing difficulty to the modern Christian believer, are "to be accepted with sophisticated naivety as containing symbolic truth." For Watt `symbolic interpreta¬tion' is a cure-all, a magic lamp by which all scriptural afflictions are healed, theological knots are untied, and doctrinal pitfalls are safely left behind one's back. This can be noticed throughout the book.

Though God does not permit miracles, He may, arrange things in a way that the believers are naturally helped and disbelievers destroyed. Here is a wise explanation which also does not tax secular imagination:

Although God cannot be said to interfere with the laws governing natural events, yet the total situation (including the characters of the human beings involved) may be such that certain events prove disastrous for unbelievers or, in other cases, advantageous for believers. Since God is ultimately behind everything, one is justified in saying that He has helped the unbelievers (and helped the believers. (p. 116

God as the Lord of History

In the sixth chapter called "God as the Lord of History", Watt opens a very interesting

discussion on the issue of sacral and secular views of history. Historical events, he explains, may be written about in several different ways, according to the interests of the writer and of his potential readers. The essential work of the historian may be said to be to discover significant patterns in that great and complex chaos which is the course of events .... Sacral history presents the course of events in the historical process as controlled by God. (p. 105)

The secular historian is chiefly concerned with those patterns which we describe as political, economic, social and intellectual factors, and the like, whereas sacral history deals with the patterns which are relevant to the Godward aspect of events. (p. 110)

But how does God control the course of history in the light of Watt's statement that `there is no overt interference with natural law' on His part? In addition to the `boundary conditions' and `inner orientation,' there are two other ways in which God may control events:

(1) He may initiate a series of events by `calling' individuals to undertake some task or project, as He called Abraham, Moses and Muhammad; (2) He may strengthen men to fight in battle and gain victory and to carry on in adverse circumstances, and conversely He may weaken the opponents of those He favours by causing them to lose confidence, to entertain false beliefs and the like. (p. 107)

A prophet's consciousness of his prophetic mission is made to appear like a deep-seated psychological compulsion, called by Watt `inner prompting', which "on the one hand constitutes an initiative by God; but on the other hand does not destroy or override a man's freedom since it is for him to decide whether to respond to the call or not, whether to follow the prompting or not." Watt forgets to mention the case of Jonah who had tried to escape the dictates of, what he would call, Jonah's `inner prompting.'

Watt has a characteristically Christian view of history which is divisible into secular and sacral compartments. This split view of reality is unacceptable to the Muslim, particularly the Shi'ahs, for whom not only two different views of history characterized as sacral and secular are unacceptable, but also there cannot be more than one sacral historical perspective for all mankind. Man, according to Islam, is a sacral creature. The purpose of his creation and life are intrinsically sacral:

I have not created the jinn and mankind except to serve Me. (51:56)

The creation of Adam was realization of a sacral Divine plan, the wisdom of which even the angels could not readily see. They thought that man was unfit for the fulfilment of the sacral objective for which God wished to create him, and he would degrade himself to the level of the beast and cause corruption and bloodshed upon the earth.'

The Quran views the entire history of humanity, the past and the future, in a single sacral

perspective, as can be seen from the verse 2:213, quoted earlier and the following verses:

It is He Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the polytheists be averse. (61:9)

... and there is not a nation but a warner has passed among them. (35:24) He has laid down for you as religion that He charged Noah with, and that We have revealed to thee [MuhammadJ , and that We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus, [saying]: "Establish the religion, and scatter not regarding it .... They scattered not, save after knowledge had come to them, being insolent one to another .... (42:13-14)

The religion near God is Islam. Those who were given the Book were not at variance except after knowledge came to them, being insolent one to another .... (3:19)

The Quran condemns the `chosen-people syndrome' of the Jews and the Christians, which led to an unreal partitioning of sacral histories as an incurable disease lasting until the Judgement Day, and warns the Muslims against doing the same thing.

The Jews say, `The Christians stand not on anything'; the Christians say, `The Jews stand not on anything'; yet they [both] recite the [same Divine] scriptures. So, too, the ignorant say the like of them. God shall decide between them on the Day of Resurrection touching their differences. (2:113) And they say, `none shall enter Paradise except that they be Jews or Christians.' Such (are their fancies. Say: Produce your proof, if you speak truly.' (2:111