

Book Review

Charles Tripp (2006). *Islam and the Moral Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. x+229. ISBN –13 978-0-521-68244-2 (PB).

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Capitalism is the dominant economic system in the world. It developed over three centuries, during which it encountered several challenges, the most prominent of which came from socialism. The scathing criticism of socialists, reformers and moralists on the exploitative mode of capitalism threatened its foundations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it has demonstrated a remarkable tendency to reinvent itself through adjustments and modifications to its earlier versions. As a result, it has so far withstood all attacks on its foundations.

During the later part of nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, various Muslim thinkers analysed the impact of capitalism on Islam and Muslim societies. They grappled with the new phenomena of capital accumulation, distribution of income, economic backwardness, exploitation of Muslim lands by colonial masters and introduction of capitalist institutions in their countries. *Islam and the Moral Economy* studies and synthesizes various responses developed by the Muslim religious scholars, social reformers and political leaders over the last sixty years. The book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the question of Islamic society, a concept that emerged with the introduction of capitalist institutions in the Muslim lands by the colonial powers. Chapter 2 summarizes the writings and thought of Islamic social critics on questions of social solidarity, property, the problem of money and society's interest as encapsulated in the Islamic legal doctrine of *maṣlahah*. Chapter 3 deals with the concept of Islamic socialism as developed in theory and as practiced by some Muslim governments, such as Egypt and Syria. Chapter 4 discusses

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the theory and practice of Islamic banking and Islamic economics. The last chapter deals with the Islamic response to the questions of gender equality and the emergence of terrorism in Islamic countries for countering capitalism.

The book argues that the emergence of capitalism as a dominant mode of production raised new challenges before the Muslim intellectuals and they had to contend with new vocabulary and idioms to respond to these challenges. The Muslim scholars framed their response while living in capitalist societies. Therefore, the very same framework that they were criticizing influenced their responses. They did draw upon rich Islamic primary sources for finding parallels to the situations they were facing in their times. However, they were not totally successful in presenting precise parallels, as the ground reality had changed over centuries. The Muslim scholars had to stretch and strain the original Islamic juridical sources to draw conclusions for the present age.

The real problem that the Muslim scholars faced was in translating the ideal Islamic vision into practice. The ideal Muslim, practicing the Islamic values and norms in letter and spirit, could exist in theoretical discussions, religious rhetoric and romantic discourses. When it came to finding a society that is composed of such ideal human beings, the Muslim *ummah* was unable to present even a single example over the last one-century or more.

The author argues that most of the criticism on capitalism by the Muslim scholars had close similarities with the criticism of non-Muslim scholars and social activists in the capitalist societies themselves in their respective times. Thus the Islamic response was recognizably part of a general modern concern about sociability, rationality, ethics and human welfare. Although the Muslim intellectuals drew upon the vast historical tradition of Islam and the experience of early caliphates, yet the language, idiom and point of reference for translating that material remained extremely close to the theory of the nation state as developed under capitalism.

The concept and practice of 'Islamic socialism' emerged as a response to the exploitation of capitalist institutions during the nineteenth century and later. It arose as a criticism of dire poverty, concentration of wealth, feudal aristocracy, urban unemployment and extreme misery of the masses. The Muslim scholars quoted profusely from the Islamic primary sources to show that Islam can handle these human problems adequately. However, the Islamic governments exploited this robust theoretical material for consolidating their own powers over the masses though massive

nationalization programmes. This gave birth to another type of exploitative machinery in the name of 'Islamic socialism'. Having said that, we can say that the subsequent social developments and the defeat of socialism worldwide by global capitalism have made these debates on 'Islamic socialism' more or less redundant.

The author has also made incisive criticism of Islamic banking and Islamic economics, which are still going concerns. Islamic banking, which emerged to find a mechanism for eliminating commercial interest from financial transactions, has grown in practice. While the debate on the prohibition of *ribā* is still alive, the modern Islamic banking is based on the concept that *ribā* stands for all types of interest. For finding an Islamic alternative to interest-based banking, the Islamic bankers have applied various Islamic juridical concepts to give the financial institutions an Islamic appearance. The Islamic bankers have been successful in finding a series of modes of financing which are akin to fixed rate of interest. However, in practice it is difficult to tell the exact difference between interest-based banks and Islamic banks. In the final analysis, both of them provide finance at a cost. It is only a procedural matter how you calculate the cost. The deeper concerns about the exploitative role of interest in financial transactions have been shifted to the back seat. The net effect of Islamic banking has been that Muslim capital, which was outside the circuit of global capitalism, has now been sucked into the global capitalist market. The rest is business as usual. There is a lot of sense in what the author says. I think Islamic economics theorists and practitioners should take the criticism seriously.

Similarly, the author's criticism of Islamic economics is quite scathing. The Islamic economists have not been able to deliver much of what they had promised when they initiated the project of finding a new branch of knowledge, parallel to positive economics, that is based on the moral principles of Islam. Instead, they have ended up in adapting the positive economics, using the tools and methods of neo-classical economists and decorating them with *Qur'ānic* verses, traditions of the Prophet and case studies from Islamic history. Again, I think there is a lot of food for thought for Muslim economists in this criticism.

In the last chapter the author presents the Islamic position on gender issues and on terrorism. In summary his argument is that there is no final consensus on the role and rights of women in Islam. This criticism he has raised about other issues as well. I think the author has been unfair in this regard. It is difficult to expect a consensus on social issues among

Muslim scholars. This has not been so anywhere else. The author should have noted that a growing number of Muslim women around the globe are participating in the socio-economic spheres of life, while remaining true to Islamic moral values and dress code. It is only Western chauvinism that countries like France are denying them (or seeking to deny them) the right to practice their faith while working in the public space of educational institutions, offices and factories.

The author has also portrayed the extremist views of some Muslims about *jihād* and terrorism. The message is that there is a strand of Muslim extremists who consider that terrorism is justified under the generic Islamic doctrine of *jihād*. I think the author needed to clarify that such a strand is in absolute minority and the vast majority of Muslim scholars and people do not agree with that. It would have made the book's argument more balanced.

The author has based his discussion on a wide selection of Islamic writings. It is a scholarly work and deserves serious attention by the Muslim intellectual. However, I was a little dismayed to see that the author has not discussed at length (except for a short reference) the writings of Muhammad Iqbal and Mawdudi in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, who influenced vast numbers of people. In particular Iqbal pleaded for spiritual emancipation of humanity and substitution of capitalist democracy with spiritual democracy. Thus Iqbal's appeal is more general and broad-based and addresses humanity as a whole, rather than Muslims alone. Similarly, while discussing Islamic economics, the author has not discussed at length writings of such pioneers as M. N. Siddiqi, Umer Chapra, Monzer Kahf, Anas Zarqa, Khurshid Ahmad and a large number of other prominent scholars. He would have been able to see the case for Islamic economics in its proper perspective. The book would have been more balanced if the author had faced up to the arguments presented in the writings of these scholars on Islamic economics.