

The Islamic Tradition of “*Taḥannuth*” of the *Jāhilī* Arab

Muḥammad Yaseen Mazhar Siddiqui

Abstract: *Taḥannuth*, literally means *tabarrur* i.e. to do good and pious deeds in the hope of getting divine rewards, has a very special connotation which is generally not understood by the most *sīrah* writers, simply because they do not study it in its real historical perspective.

In fact *taḥannuth* is a changed form of *taḥannuf*, which means following the *millah* (religio-cultural path) of the Prophet Ibrāhīm (A.S.) who is unequivocally termed in the Holy *Qur’ān* and *āḥadīth* as *ḥanīf* and his path as *ḥanīfiyyah*, thus it signifies nothing but sincere adherence to the religion of Ibrāhīm (A.S.).

In the words of Shah Walī Allah Dehlavī (1703-1762) the last Prophet of Islām Muḥammad (S.A.W.) was divinely sent and raised to revive the original *ḥanīfiyyah* which is essentially Islām in its spiritual, social and religious perspective. Thus, *ḥanīfiyyah* is a multifaceted and multi-dimensional in its creeds, scopes and applications.

Meditation or *jiwār* i.e. retiring to seclusion for prayer and worship purposes is only a part of the *ḥanīfī* teachings which had been practiced all along from the time of Ibrāhīm (A.S.). It was a true legacy handed over by the true followers of the *ḥanīfiyyah* (i.e. Islām) to the Arabs, particularly the Quraysh of Makkah, who interestingly claimed enough and projected themselves as the followers of the religion of Ibrāhīm (A.S.).

The *jāhilī* Arabs, and mainly the Quraysh of Makkah, continued the meditation or *jiwār* in seclusion in the month of Ramaḍān as a part of their Ibrāhīmīc religion; and according to one set of traditions *jiwār* in the cave of Hirā was initiated by the Prophet's illustrious grandfather ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib Hāshamī during his early days and others, for the matter, spent the Holy month of Ramaḍān in other seclusions and lonely places; it was actually an Arab national religious ritual, performed throughout the Arabia.

The Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.) practiced this *jiwār* in the cave of Hira in the month of Ramaḍān before his *bi’tah* (prophethood) for many years as a part of his true Ibrāhīmīc religion or *ḥanīfiyyah* which was preceded

narrates the restraint of the Prophet (peace be upon him) at waging a war against the enemies of the Faith and the circumstances which led him to defend Islām and the believers "from Makkans... treacherous Jewish and heathen tribes... his object was defense, retaliation, or the punishment of some undoubted wrong, never revenge as Arabs understood it" (p.224).

The book also contains extracts from his letters written to his wife in March and April 1913, while he was journeying through Turkey. The letters exhibit his growing concern and love for the Islamic people and their faith which in the end led to his conversion to Islām: "This morning I wandered in Stamboul... went to Aya Sophia... also the tomb of Sultan Selim, where I amazed the man in charge by reading aloud a page of a very fine M.S. Koran he showed me..." (279).

This Book (The Noble *Qur'ān*) eventually was to give him everlasting fame and success in life, and was to be a source of inspiration and light for countless people who did not know Arabic or a language wherein the *Qur'ān* was available in translation.

The compiler/editor of this book has done a great service to this servant of Islām. Even those who read and use his translation of the Noble Book do not know much about him and his contribution to the introduction of Islām in the West. It is hoped that this compilation will be a source of inspiration for our young scholars.

Abdul Qadeer Saleem
IJ, 70/2 Nazimabad,
KARACHI

cease. "The fight is not of Muslim against Christian, but of good against evil. If we make that clear... by our example, all upright and well intentioned men will rally to us, and if the Muslim Empire is preserved... we will strive to make it, not an empire like another, but in every truth Allah's kingdom upon earth" (p.63).

In his five lectures on the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Pickthall briefly narrates the events in the life of the Holy Messenger of Allah who came in the limelight of history as guide, teacher and model for entire humanity. "Prophet's... life affords the most complete example to humanity, for, he experienced both poverty and wealth, persecution and prosperity, helplessness and extreme power, and in every circumstances he was exemplary" (P.142). His noble character made him the most loved and revered person in the world, not only in his lifetime but even today. "As husband, father, neighbour, friend, he was a pattern for all ages, no less than as a ruler and *imām*. All who came in contact with him felt his charm of personality, a charm diffusing happiness and peace of mind. One word from him sufficed to silence angry disputants, to clear the sorrowful, and heal the sick at heart. Even those who, in his absence, worked against him were vanquished by his presence and made willing slaves" (p. 139).

While speaking about "Islām and Progress", Pickthall is right when he says that "El-Islām is in its essence, a religion of enlightenment"... That is right, but to go on saying that "the pious Muslim is, in fact, enjoined to be as free a thinker as the average agnostic of Christian lands," (p. 210), is stretching a point too far. Unfortunately many learned defenders of Islām in the earlier part of 20th century (Sir Syed Aḥmad Khān and Muḥammad Iqbāl are not exception) have been too enthusiastic in proving their (and Islām's) modernity. Pickthall is also no exception.

Islām is commonly charged as a religion, which approves and promotes bloodshed. The battles during the life time of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) and after, are pointed out as evidence that Islām permits and encourages destruction of human life/killing. *Jihād*, it is said, is one of the essential pillars of Islām. The command to kill, ... is the chief among the grievances cherished by the Christian moralists..." (p.219). Pickthall defends *jihād* and destroying the enemy when it becomes absolutely necessary to do so. He at length

and preacher and politically motivated conscientious believer (he liked Gandhi, attended sessions of All India Congress; was sent to London by the Nizām government to the first Round Table Conference with Hyderabad Delegation).

As the "Introduction" (by Muhammad Shahid Haneef, the editor of the book) and the three biographical accounts comprising the first chapter of the book, reveal, Muhammad Pickthall's 62 years of life (1875-1937) were packed with varied experiences, and his interests.

Beside the 3 biographical accounts in Chapter 1, the six chapters contain thirty-one articles and speeches published in various magazines. The first four articles are under the caption "Allāh: The All Mighty." Pickthall captures his audience at London Muslim House by telling a story, "I have read somewhere of a Chinese sage who taught men heavenly truth. He also kept a white mouse in a box, and wore a yellow cloak. A few years after his death a traveler in that country found that religion of the people consisted of keeping white mice in boxes and wearing yellow cloaks. His disciples had ignored the heavenly truths." This happened in various degrees with almost all the religions of the world. Except Islām, which, with Allah's protection, has preserved all the teachings in their original form in the *Qur'ān*. Though "no translation gives the least idea of the beauty and fire of inspiration of that book in Arabic, but no translation can conceal from you the fact that it contains a vision and a Law for all humanity" (p.27). He further tells his "English" audience that "other scriptures may be out of date, but this remains, and those who seek the kingdom of Allah must come to it" (p.33). In this regard it seems that he considers all men and women who do "good works with earnest purpose" that they...are "secure" for their reward in the hereafter – irrespective of their formal faith (p.28). "At the last Judgment we shall not be judged separately in our relation to Allah, but all together in our relation to His purpose in this world... in our relation to the soul of all humanity... as we did good or evil to the single soul of all humanity we shall be accepted or rejected" (p.39).

This is the universal element in Islām. "Islām is not a religion; it is the religion. It is in fact the essential part of all true religions which can claim a divine origin" (p.57). If this essential truth is clearly understood, the strife between followers of different religions will

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Muhammad Shahid Haneef (Ed.), *Writings of Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 2003. Pages 317+12 (Index). Hardbound. Price not mentioned.

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) is a well-known translator of the noble *Qur'ān* in English language. Born to a devout Christian family of England (his father Rev. Charles Pickthall, Rector of Chilledford, and grandfather, both were clergyman), no one knew at that time that he would eventually be graced by Allah to be the one of those who had introduced Islām in the West in 20th Century. After formal schooling in his native England and in Europe he went to Palestine and studied there Arabic with an intention to enter in British Foreign Service. This is how he was exposed to Islām at first hand. He traveled widely in the Middle East and Turkey and embraced Islām after the first hand knowledge about its basic sources. While in India, while in the service of Mīr Usmān 'Alī Khān, the Nizām (Ruler) of Hyderabad Deccan State, he decided to translate the noble *Qur'ān* into his native language, English. The Nizām gave him leave on full pay and the great task was accomplished.

This was the first rendering of the noble *Qur'ān* in a European language *by a Muslim*. The task was a difficult one, even for one whose mother tongue was English. He admitted in "The Glorious *Qur'ān*" (the title he gave to his translation): "The *Qur'ān* cannot be translated...and the view of the present writer. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the *Qur'ān* – and peradventure something of the charm – in English. It can never take the place of the *Qur'ān* in Arabic, nor is it [i.e. his translation] meant to do so ("Foreword" to *The Glorious Qur'ān*)."

The translation of the *Qur'ān*, this singular achievement has overshadowed his other interests and endeavours as a journalist (editor of '*Bombay Chronicle*' and '*Islamic Culture*', Hyderabad-Deccan), an educationist and earlier a writer of fiction, (says he, "... English people, as a rule, prefer the most deceiving kind of fiction. They like their fiction to be evidently false."), as a Muslim scholar