AN ANALYSIS OF PHILOSOPHIC ISLAM AND MODERN THOUGHT:
A STUDY OF MUHAMMAD ALEXANDER RUSSELL WEBB

Abstract

The story of Alexander Russell Webb, an early American convert to Islam, is only beginning to come to the attention of American Muslims. The first known white American convert to Islam was Web, a middle class Protestant who as inspired to turn to Islam through his reading and studying of the religion. Webb was endlessly committed to Islam and to preaching the message of Islam in America, but he always considered himself a ‘plain American citizen’. He did not see his religion or his acceptance of Islam as extraordinary; he believed that he was able to accept Islam earlier than his fellow countrymen simply because he had the benefit of understanding it sooner. He never saw himself at odds with the American people or culture, and his contemporaries took a keen and kindly interest in Webb and his work. This article focuses on a significant subject which is “Philosophic Islam,” Alexander Russell Webb’s best-attended Indian lecture, was delivered in Hyderabad on November 25, 1892. Webb used the term “philosophy” generically here and elsewhere for the wisdom implicit in a religion’s inner teaching, and not in reference to classical philosophy. Philosophic Islam, for Webb, referred to certain aspects of the Islamic scriptural teaching, especially its insistence that nature bears witness to God’s perfection.

Keywords: Alexander Russell Webb, Islam, Philosophy, Materialism, Theosophy.
İSLAM FELSEFESİ VE MODERN DÜŞÜNCE ÜZERINE BİR ANALIZ: 
MUHAMMED ALEXANDER RUSSELL WEBB ÖRNEĞİ

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Introduction

Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) wasn’t the first American convert to Islam, but he was America’s earliest Muslim convert to publicly promote Islam in a meaningful way.¹ He was believer in Theosophy, which advocated a comparative study of religious traditions with the assumption that beneath all of the surface-level differences, these traditions shared an esoteric unity. The assumption that all religions teach essentially the same thing may sound cool and pluralist, but this means that you understand every religion’s truest, innermost essence. And then it becomes just another way to place your own voice at the center and ignore the tradition as it’s actually lived—which is exactly what Webb did.

Many Theosophists held that the hidden truth that existed in all religions could be most easily retrieved from Buddhism. They imagined Buddhism as basically everything that 19th century Western Protestant liberals wanted religion to be: rational, philosophical, compatible

with modern science, free of dogmas and ritualism, and opposed to priesthoods. Webb, however, found Islam to be not only a worthy expression of Theosophical ideals, but, in fact, the best candidate for a universal modern religion. He reinvented Muhammad as a rationalist philosopher and even made an unsupported claim that Islam “requires no belief in the supernatural.” Science and reason represented Islam’s “true spirit” as Webb understood it.

Webb lamented that while Islam was “the most perfect system of spiritual development the world has ever known,” the effects of “climate and racial influence” left Muslims that he had observed in South Asia unable to comprehend what Prophet Muhammad (a.s.) had taught. Webb argued that South Asian Muslims, whom he sometimes called “niggers” in his journals, were so caught up in “ignorance and superstition” that they understood Islam no better than cows or horses.

“We stopped to look at something and two fanatical Mussulmans accosted us. One claimed that I had offended the whole Mohammedan population of Hyderabad by not making proper genuflexions at prayer, and the other insisted that it was my duty to adopt the Mussulman dress at once lest I should be mistaken for a Kafir. Poor, benighted creatures! They have no more idea of the true spirit of Islam than the cows or horses. Ignorance and superstition have done a fearful work all over India.”

He believed that Muslims had contaminated their originally “pure” religions with lowly culture, but Webb could not see the ways in which his own cultures directed his readings of Islam. He projected 19th century liberal Protestantism and scientific rationalism onto pre-modern scriptures without ever doubting that he was on “objective” and “scientific” searches for truth.

In the case of Webb, the idea that all religions shared esoteric truths meant that the vast majority of people had missed the point, and thus needed outsiders to train them in the proper understandings of their own traditions. The convert imagined as coming from a place outside culture, becomes privileged as the owner of truth and authenticity. Nowadays people have forgotten that this Anglo-Saxon Alexander R. Webb isn’t simply extracting “true” meaning from the text, but bringing his own cultural baggage and injecting it into the words.

Webb emphasized his exercise of discrimination in discerning what he found praiseworthy and worthy of imitation in Islam and what he found to be unacceptable. It was Islam’s “pure

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"Philosophic Islam"

"Philosophic Islam," Webb’s best-attended Indian lecture, was delivered in Hyderabad on 25 November 1892. Webb used the term “philosophy” generically here and elsewhere for the wisdom implicit in a religion’s inner teaching, and not in reference to classical philosophy. Philosophic Islam, for Webb, referred to certain aspects of the Islamic scriptural teaching, especially its insistence that nature bears witness to God’s perfection. The lecture was similar to Webb’s presentation in Calcutta, focusing on the effects of material science and materialism on the religious mood of the time and their intrinsic methodological inability to discover spiritual truth. Philosophic Islam returned to the issue of polygamy but added the institution of gender segregation (purdah), which Webb had not treated before:

I know very little of the practical application of the purdah system or of polygamy in the East, and, therefore, cannot say whether they are practiced in the true Islamic spirit or not. If they are not applied properly and justly they cannot produce good results; but in my humble opinion the purdah system and polygamy, rationally and intelligently engrafted upon our social system, are the only possible remedies for the evils with which it is afflicted to-day. Prostitution, marital infidelity, drunkenness and kindred vices are prevalent from one end of the vast country to the other. Orthodox Christianity and orthodox Christian laws have fought in vain against these evils for a hundred years, and still they have steadily increased. Now, I believe that Islam and Islamic laws should have an opportunity to try and rid our social system of the monsters of sin that are preying upon it.12

In Webb’s speech before fellow Muslims in Hyderabad, India, he presented the philosophical content of Islam, particularly how it could meet the spiritual needs of “the many thousands of well-balanced people in America who are capable of understanding and appreciating what is

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11 Webb, Islam, p. 27.
good and reasonable."\(^13\) He attributed the death of “child-like” faith in traditional religion to the era’s tendency towards cynical, skeptical thought and trends of atheism and agnosticism. He deduced that these attitudes derived from the writings of the day’s materialistic philosophers.

Skepticism and doubt, the legitimate offspring of advanced materialistic education and civilization, there are many minds which require more evidence of the truth of a religious system than the dogmatic assertions of those who claim to be religious authorities. The simple, child-like faith handed down to them by their ancestors has been blighted by the cruel frosts of atheism and agnosticism or frozen to death by our Western nineteenth century civilization.\(^14\)

However, Webb stopped short of condemning some of these thinkers altogether stating,

I will not say that it would have been better if the works of many of our modern materialistic philosophers had never seen the light of day, for it is quite probable that they may prove, after all, very potent factors in bringing the educated, progressive masses into the true path.\(^15\)

Indeed, before Webb’s conversion, he consulted such works in his quest for answers but found them unable to solve his existential dilemma. Sympathizing with free-thinkers who required answers and explanations, Webb argued that others should also question the validity of their own religion,

If the atheist and materialist are correct in their conclusion, then there is no reason in the world why men should have a religion at all; but it seems to me that the question is of sufficient importance to man to justify more than a superficial examination. If, as is claimed by the religious world, this present life is but an infinitesimal period as compared to the life beyond, and that the conditions of the future existence are largely determined by our course of conduct and thought here, then it is of vital importance to us to know whether the claim of religion is valid and what kind of a religion is necessary in order to bring about desired results.\(^16\)

Webb continued in his lecture to discuss the concept of religion. Drawing upon citations from religious scholars and philosophers such as Max Muller, Marcus Aurelius, and Spinoza, he noted that definitions of the term, “religion” inevitably vary.\(^17\) Citing Herbert Spencer’s claim that religion is universal to all cultures of the world\(^18\), Webb observed that every culture has own distinctive faith, from the “civilized” West to the “indigenous” East. He attributed this religious instinct to human nature. Explaining the human tendency to be religious, Webb determined that

\(^{16}\)Webb, *The Three Lectures* p.41.
It cannot be the result of mere chance nor education, for it can be clearly traced back through all the generations of mankind as far as history leads us, and it is as clearly shown that it was strongest where education was unknown. It is just as much a part of human nature in its uncultured, unrefined condition as it is in its most refined aspect. In fact we find that there is, as a rule, less religious devotion among the educated than among the uneducated classes.19

Webb equated this raw instinct with “true” religion and “true” science – two entities he deemed as being in complete harmony with one another. It the “materialistic” religion and “materialistic” science, Webb asserted, which have always been at odds with each other, both disciplines accumulated by the collective efforts of mankind. He noted that true science puts man in a more humble perspective in acknowledging and attributing creation to a higher conscious being. On the other hand, he argued, that materialistic science is limited in its ability to solve the mysteries of life. It is unable to explain the underlying forces of nature.

Although Webb acknowledged the practical value of materialistic science, he added “when it stands in the presence of the wonders of life and death and views the operations of those wonderful laws which govern the various manifestations of what we call “nature”, it drops its hands and head in helpless confusion.”20 Webb suggested that material science should not be consulted to attain spiritual knowledge. He deemed it useless in matters of metaphysics. As an example, he cited the process of thinking. Thoughts, he stated, are beyond empirical definition or scientific control

Try to catch one and hold it in your mind steadily for ten minutes, --- or even five --- if you can. Before you held it a minute, another will crowd it out of your grasp and slip away from you before you can recover yourself. Are you a master of your thoughts? Can you control yourself?21

Webb cited one certainty that true religion and material science agree upon – man’s distinction from the animals. While both are driven by the instinct to survive, man has the additional faculty of logic and the capability to choose righteous acts over primal ones. However, he asserted that the ability to reason, a trait unique to humans, is not always developed and utilized. Man on the other hand, Webb submitted, has a choice; when he preys upon others, namely his fellow man; he often does so to advance his own wealth and comfort. Even those opted to cultivate their intellects in the institutions of higher learning, Webb argued, aspired to gain some wealth. He stated,

If you will ask the young man who is striving to secure a perfect and complete education why he is doing so, he may tell you that his first purpose is to fit himself to be of service to humanity, but isn’t it quite probable that his real motive is to win the respect and admiration of the world, to secure a good social position and just a little money in the future?22

19 Webb, The Three Lectures p. 43.
20 Webb, The Three Lectures p. 44.
21 Webb, Ibid p. 44.
22 Webb, The Three Lectures p. 46.
Despite this contention that avarice and self-promotion was the motivating factor for most who sought higher education, Webb was not opposed to education and intellectual refinement. In fact, he encouraged it. His reason being, “Our Prophet once said that he who knew himself knew God; if you will study yourselves, you will certainly find the subject interesting to say the least.”23

Webb asserted that the pursuit of knowledge, when free of greed and worldly ambition, exposes materialistic science – “And what is the way pointed out by this grandest of all prophets? Islam! Resignation to the will of God; the omniscient omnipresent, omnipotent God, who stands ready to lead the aspiring soul out of the darkness of materialism into that light which shines for all as a guide to Paradise.”24

Returning to his original philosophic question of whether there is life beyond the grave and what measures are necessary to ensure the best possible conditions of that life, Webb argued that it is a query each man must answer for himself. Deducing that the afterlife must be infinitely longer than the time one spends on earth, Webb asserted that striving to understand it and the ways to prepare for it are the most important topics one could ever study.

Webb believed that at length the limitations of modern science for disclosing the ultimate nature of reality or arriving at spiritual truth. Science could describe and unlock the material secrets of the physical universe but never discover the meaning of life. The latter was the province of “higher science,”25 the primordial knowledge of the “mysteries of life and death”26 as revealed through the prophets.27 To illustrate the limitations of scientific methodology, Webb invoked the analogy of the screwdriver and the gimlet (a pointed awl-like instrument):

Now what would you think of a man who tried to take a screw out of a piece of hard wood with a gimlet and insisted upon it that the thing couldn’t be done because the tool wouldn’t fit into the slot of the screw? Wouldn’t you quite naturally and properly call him an idiot and tell him to go and get a screw-driver?

Now modern science has found that its gimlet will not turn the screw of spiritual dynamics and therefore declares that it cannot be turned. Now what rather surprises me is that the sceptic clings so tenaciously to that gimlet when there is a screw-driver so near at hand.

Every true prophet the world has ever known has pointed out the way to the solution of the problems of life and death and every sceptic and materialist has stubbornly and foolishly persisted in ignoring it and following the path which leads directly away from it. He clings to the gimlet and refuses to take the screw-driver when it is offered to him.28

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25 Webb, Ibid, p. 44.
27 Webb, Ibid, pp. 41-44.
These obstinate individuals, Webb pointed out, insist upon the gimlet of scientific inquiry because the alternative – the screwdriver of Islam – requires sacrificing some of the luxuries of the good life, especially the esteem afforded them by their friends and colleagues. “When you strike at a man’s comfort, pleasure, ambition or pocket,” Webb asserted, “he will either hastily beat a retreat, carrying his treasures with him, or fight like a demon to retain them.”

To contrast his description of those dependent upon material philosophy and religion, Webb extolled the virtues of Prophet Mohammed (a.s.). His depiction of the Prophet was that of a selfless, pious teacher, whose humble demeanor and holy wisdom points to an effective method of discerning life’s mysteries of attaining salvation. Islam, Webb declared, is God’s beacon, which illuminates the way to eternal life.

**Conclusion**

“Philosophic Islam” broached the topic of Webb’s proposed American Mission and the lecture addressed the misgivings of some Indian Muslims Webb had encountered who feared that Islam would repel a “progressive and intelligent” people like Americans. Webb tried to remind the American people the connection between Islam and philosophy and subsequently encouraged them to engage in a careful study and understanding of the Islamic system before attempting to criticize or condemn it. He argued that it was precisely those forward-looking qualities in Americans that would attract them to Islam, if it were properly presented and understood.

Webb thought that modern materialistic philosophy might ultimately be of use in bringing Westerners to Islam. He understood the critical spirit of modern thought as having brought humanity “direct and positive benefit” and created the possibility of new spiritual growth. At the same time, materialistic philosophy had exposed humanity to a hazard potentially greater than its benefits: the danger of effacing forever the universal religious truths and moral values without which humanity could not survive. It had torn down the edifice of spirituality with little or no hope of rebuilding.

Webb argued that natural spiritual gifts could be lost just as they could be nurtured and developed to perfection. One’s spiritual potential could be developed until the “higher faculties of our nature” came “to dominate our whole being,” but this required a life of sound spirituality based on “the cultivation of fraternal love, perfect cleanliness of mind and body, and devotion to God.”

In prescribing the practice of Islam, the culmination of his own search for spiritual fulfillment, Webb analyzed the nature of the soul and its incarnation within the body. It is not the body; he advanced, but the soul which experiences all pleasure and pain, physical, emotional and spiritual alike. Alluding to one of the social problems of the time, Webb asserted that addic-

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31 Webb, *The Three Lectures*, pp. 51-52
tion, too, is more an ailment of the soul than the body. Habit, good or bad, Webb noted, once ingrained, becomes virtually unbreakable. Thus, he stressed the importance in recognizing the soul’s role:

It is the soul that thinks and feels, not the body. The body of itself without the soul cannot crave liquor nor tobacco. Does the craving cease when the body dies? No, not if the soul is immortal, and personally, I am fully convinced that it is. Now suppose we accept the hypothesis that this craving clings to the soul after death, and it has no body through which, or by means of which, it can gratify or satisfy it; would not the suffering be intensified a hundred-fold?33

Webb’s purpose for this example was to show that the unseen elements of one’s self are as adept towards development and strengthening as any other part of the physical body. Without regular exercise, Webb argued, the intellect will atrophy just as readily as an immobilized arm or leg. In keeping with this holistic approach, Webb theorized that following a course of “cultivation of fraternal love, perfect cleanliness of mind and body, and devotion to God” would result in the soul’s cleave from one’s more base instincts.34 Conversely, Webb maintained that should one pursue the primal lure of his animal instincts and reject divine guidance, his outcome “will be physical and downward, instead of spiritual and upward.”35

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33 Webb, The Three Lectures, p. 49.
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