An Anniversary of Fourteen Centuries of the Advent of Islam to Africa

The International Conference

ISLAM IN AFRICA

L'Anniversaire de Quatorze Siècles de l'Islam en Afrique
La Conférence Internationale

ISLAM EN AFRIQUE

26-27 Nov 2006
6-7 Thu-al Gaida 1427

6th Book - Conference Papers
6ème LIVRE - ESSAIES
COMPATIBILITY BETWEEN ISLAM AND AFRICAN CULTURES

Burhan Ssebayigga*

Islam is a natural religion (Din al Fitra) and as such it should be compatible with all the cultures that are still in their original state of purity. Islam conforms to “Reason” but is not subjected to it. What is Islamic is rational but not all that rational is Islamic. This is so because the scope of “Reason” is limited but the scope of “revelation” is limitless.

The African communities believe in the sovereignty of Tradition and authority more than they believe in “Reason”. Tradition and authority are products of consensus (Ijma). What is authoritative in Islam is what Allah has commanded and interpreted by the Traditions of His prophet.

The sixth article of faith in Islam commits a Muslim to a belief in Fatalism, pre-destination, and pre-determination. This belief is clearly manifested in the denial of causality a doctrine developed by the Ashari School of thought. Against the Greeks al Ash’ari taught that matter does not generate matter, nor does it cause matter to change. It is God that does. This is tantamount to denying causality, and al Ash’ari did so in the conviction that God’s almighty precluded the existence of other primary or ultimate causal agents.

* Institute of Languages-Makerere University.

315
In African cultures God is the Almighty and the cause of all that happens in the world. Events like rain, good harvest, drought and famine, are all attributed to God the Almighty. Prayer is a cornerstone of an African life. Man is in constant need of God’s blessing and everything is done in the name of God (Bismillah). Evil is an expression of God’s anger and unhappiness so God must be appeased all the time through prayers and sacrifice. African tradition commits a person to total submission (Islam) to the will of God, which is the Islamic ideal. There are no accidents in African life, every incident is pre-determined by God. Sickness and death are not caused by observable phenomena, but by invisible force. Whereas, “Reason” claims that things are inherently good or bad, both Islam and African cultures dismiss this claim and assert that things are good or bad in accordance with divine will. Islam does not entertain the idea of “development” or even progress in the sense that the world is moving from a hopeless situation to a better one. Since Adam’s time the world is on decline. There are many verses in the Qur’an to confirm this.

African cultures also reflect the concept of decline of value of life and worthiness of all things in the world. Chinua Achebe a celebrated African writer acknowledged this fact in his book “Things fall apart”. Many African novelists write about nostalgia, and the wish to return to the ancient style of life. According to them, Modernity represents an adulteration of the value and the meaning of life.
Islam with its emphasis on intuition (ilhám) negates the mainly Aryan mentality of analogue. This explains the absence of the copula in Arabic and in the majority of African Languages.