

## **Murtada Mutahhari and Westernization: An Exposition**

by

**Ali Imam Bameyi**

Department of Religions and Peace Studies, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

Email: [imamalibameyi@gmail.com](mailto:imamalibameyi@gmail.com)

Ph: +2348026339347

### **Abstract**

Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have had the onerous task of facing challenges of various dimensions from one environment to another and that of course would naturally depend on the enormity of the challenges and the intellectual ability of the scholar involved to mount the required opposition to such challenges. Before the advent of colonialism, the norm was usually the royal court posing the biggest threat or a direct challenge to the *ulama* as in the case of the four Imams of the Sunni schools of thought. The same could also be said of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio and his companions who had the daunting task of facing the royal opposition mounted by the *sarkis* of their days. This trend of the royal court versus traditional *ulama* squabble continued in many parts of the Muslim world until the coming of the colonialists. Then, the challenges became doubled as the *ulama* had to face on the one hand an indigenous opposition mounted by the royal court and a rampaging foreign and anti-Islamic ideology on the other. This foreign menace more often than not, because of its economic advantage had some measure of support from a section of the clergy i.e. the *ulama* thereby polarizing their camp into two: one, the conservatives who were either aligned with the ruling elites / colonialists and known as the official clergy and indifferent to whatever happened in their environment while the other group known by the term ‘radicals’ or ‘non-conformists’ constituted those who saw the colonialists and their supporters as a disease eating deep into the fabric of the *ummah* and should therefore be cured. Murtada Mutahhari belonged to the latter group as his speeches, writings and disposition were directed at what he considered a great danger not only to his country, Iran, but rather to the Muslim *ummah* at large.

**Keywords:** Murtada Mutahhari, Iran, Muslim Ummah, Westernization

### **Brief History of Mutahhari:**

Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari, one of the principal architects of the new Islamic consciousness in Iran, was born on February 2, 1920, in Fariman, then a village, and now a township, about sixty kilometers from Mashhad, the great center of Shiite pilgrimage and learning in Eastern Iran.

His father was Muhammad Husain Mutahhari, a renowned scholar who studied in Najaf and spent several years in Egypt and the Hijaz before returning to Fariman. The elder Mutahhari was of a different caste of mind than his son, who in any event came to outshine him. The father was devoted to the works of the celebrated traditionalist, Mullah Muhammad Baqir Majlisi; whereas the son's great hero among the Shi'a scholars of the past was the theosophist Mullah Sadra. His mother's name was Sakinah, a pious woman who also belonged to a prominent religious family of that time.

Nonetheless, Ayatollah Mutahhari always retained great respect and affection for his father, who was also his first teacher, and he dedicated to him one of his most popular books, *Dastan-e-Rastan* (The Epic of the Righteous) first published in 1960, and which was later chosen as book of the year by the Iranian National Commission for the UNESCO in 1965.

By 1946, Ayatollah Khomeini began lecturing to a small group of students that included both Mutahhari and his roommate at the Fayziya Madrasah, Ayatollah Muntaziri, on two key philosophical texts, the *Asfar al-Arba'a* of Mulla Sadra and the *Sharh-e-Manzurna* of Mulla Hadi Sabzwari. Mutahhari's participation in this group, which continued to meet until about 1951, enabled him to establish more intimate links with his teacher. Also in 1946, at the urging of Mutahhari and Muntaziri, Ayatollah Khomeini taught his first formal course on *Fiqh* and *Usul*, taking the chapter on rational proofs from the second volume of Akhund Khurasani's *Kifayatul Usul* as his teaching text. Mutahhari followed his course assiduously, while still pursuing his studies of *Fiqh* with Ayatollah Burujerdi.

Among the other teachers whose influence Mutahhari was exposed in Qum, was the great exegete of the Quran and philosopher, Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i. Mutahhari participated in both Tabataba'i's classes on the *Shifa* of Abu Ali Sina from 1950 to 1953, and the Thursday evening meetings that took place under his direction. The subject of these meetings was materialist philosophy, a remarkable choice for a group of traditional scholars. Mutahhari himself had first conceived a critical interest in materialist philosophy, especially Marxism, soon after embarking on the formal study of the rational sciences.

In 1952, Mutahhari left Qum for Tehran, where he married the daughter of Ayatollah Ruhani and began teaching philosophy at the *Madrasah Marwi*, one of the principal institutions of religious learning in the capital. This was not the beginning of his teaching career, for already in Qum he had begun to teach certain subjects - logic, philosophy, theology, and *Fiqh* - while still a student himself. But Mutahhari seems to have become progressively impatient with the somewhat restricted atmosphere of Qum, with the factionalism prevailing among some of the students and their teachers, and with their remoteness from the concerns of society. His own future prospects in Qum were also uncertain.

In addition to building his reputation as a popular and effective university lecturer, Mutahhari participated in the activities of the numerous professional Islamic associations (*anjumanha*) that had come into being under the supervision of Mahdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani. These activities were chiefly lecturing to their doctors, engineers, teachers and helping to coordinate their works. A number of Mutahhari's books in fact consist of the revised transcripts of series of lectures delivered to the Islamic associations.

The activities of the Ayatollah were intolerable for the followers of the atheistic schools and they, therefore, decided to remove him from the scene by terroristic methods. Eventually, they succeeded on the 1st of May, 1979. His death was a great tragedy. When the sad news was conveyed to Imam Khomeini he could not control his tears. In his condolence message, he said,

“I have been deprived of a dear son of mine. I am lamenting upon the death of one who was the fruit of my life” (Davari, 1997).

Ayatollah Mutahhari wrote assiduously and continuously from his student days right up to 1979, the year of his assassination. Much of his works have been published in and outside Iran. He has written a number of books not in accordance with his personal interest or predilection but with his perception of its need. Wherever a book was lacking in some vital topic of contemporary Islamic interest, Mutahhari sought to supply it.

His works have been translated and published in French, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu and English. The Islamic Seminary has had the honor of publishing some of them (Davari, 1997).

### **Mutahhari’s major works:**

Ayatollah Mutahhari was both a prolific scholar and a gifted orator. He had to his credit over fifty books and numerous speeches and lectures. Some of his works are:

- i. Divine Justice
- ii. Woman in the Quran
- iii. The Rights of Women in Islam
- iv. Society and History
- v. Islam and Marxism
- vi. The Worldview of Monotheism
- vii. Revolution and Prophethood
- viii. The Revolution of Imam Husain Ibn Ali
- ix. Human Being and Faith
- x. Training and Education in Islam
- xi. Guiding the Youth of the New Generation
- xii. Glimpses on Nahjul-Balagah of Imam Ali
- xiii. The Islamic Modest Dress (*Hijab*)

### **A Key Figure in the Islamic Revolution:**

Suddenly, after the mysterious death of Hajj Aqa Mustafa, the son of Ayatollah Khomeini, on October 23, 1977, in Najaf, the operations of the Islamic Revolution intensified. In order to guide the Revolution, the *Jami’il-yi Ruaaniyat-i-Mubariz* re-organized itself with the senior ‘*ulama* of Tehran, namely Ayatollah Dr Muhammad Mafatih, Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani (Prime Minister, 1981), Ayatollah Dr Sayyid Muhammad Beheshti and Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari. All the political announcements of the *Jami’ih-yi Ruaaniyat* were issued under Mutahhari’s guidance, and all demonstrations were organized under his supervision (Davari, 1997).

### **Mutahhari and Westernization - An Exposition:**

The following represents an analytical discourse of selected works of Ayatollah Mutahhari *vis-a-viz* his criticism of Western writers’ and scholars’ views. This will cover wide – ranging issues and will present the various styles employed by him to convey his views and ideas and his methods of exposing the perceived flaws in whatever is written about Islam:

### **On western concept of gender:**

The question of marriage and divorce and indeed family life generally occupies a fundamental position in Mutahhari's intellectual exploits. He takes a special interest in what the Westerners had to say on this significant issue doing so with a quintessence analysis and offering a solid defense of Islam with incisive responses to what he considers Western accusations and biased comments on Islam's stance on family and gender issues. To Mutahhari, the issue of women apparently needed to be tackled head-on in relation to Western attacks on Islamic views on gender.

He literally adopts an analytical approach to condemnation of the West on Islam's view on gender saying that critics often regard Islam as religion a for men that it has not acknowledged woman to be a complete human being and that it has ordained law for her which are not necessary for a human being. They went on with their criticism that if Islam had considered woman to be a complete human being, it would not have provided for polygyny, it would not have given the right of divorce to man, it would not have made the witnessing of two women equivalent to that of one man, it would neither have given the leadership of the family to the husband, it would not have made a woman's inheritance one half of inheritance of a man. It also would not have countenanced that a woman be 'priced' in the name of a dowry nor would it have provided for her economic and social independence nor would Islam have made her a 'pensioner.' From the aforesaid things, critics, Mutahhari said, alleged that Islam has humiliating views about woman and has taken her to be just a means to procreating more people (Mutahhari, 1981). Then he goes on to caution on mixing up the roles of man and woman as this mix-up would only lead to a gross misunderstanding of their individual roles that are dictated and apportioned to them according to their nature.

### **On western concept of democracy:**

One of the contributions of Mutahhari to political discourse is his success in bringing to the fore his views to educate the Muslim masses in Iran and beyond the views of Islam on governance as opposed to the Western concept of democracy. Therefore on the difference between Western concept of democracy and the way Islam sees it he says (Mutahhari, 1982):

"The kind of democracy and freedom envisaged in Islam is directly opposite to that evolved in the West. Islamic democracy is based on integrity of human freedom and individual rights. It does not add up to any perversion of human sensibility into utter sensuality. On the other hand, Islam does not favour ascetic life. It does not advocate undue repression of human concupiscence. Instead, Islam helps individuals to organize and manage their lives in a physiologically, intellectually or spiritually and sociologically harmonious manner. Its followers are able to regulate their baser instincts in a rather humane manner."

### **On western concept of nationalism:**

In advancing a critical approach towards the Western concept of nationalism, Mutahhari begins by tracing the historical background of this concept. He traced this to the French Revolution which overwhelmed entire Europe and gave rise to concepts such as 'liberty' and 'equality' culminating in the Declaration of Human Rights. He then spells out how Islam views nationalistic tendencies as compared to the West's in the following words (Mutahhari, 1991):

“Islam tells his followers that all the distinctions of colour, race and language that are observed among the nations of the world and which have been made the criteria of their separation, are accidental having no essential reality. On the whole, those people are noble and honourable who are advancing on the path of human perfection. The plurality of colours, languages and traditions in human society and all the other differences observable in nature are manifestations of the richness and variety of beings and forms of a single reality.”

### **On freedom of religion:**

One issue which has attracted a lot of controversy and generated countless criticisms, is the question of freedom of religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also appertains a segment of its revered contents to this issue. However, Mutahhari in his own submission takes a swipe at the mentality of the West *vis-a-viz* its viewpoints about religion more so when the West views it as a personal thing (Mutahhari, 1991):

“Suppose there are some people who don’t want education. You open schools for them and they oppose you and try to close them down. Don’t you think that their compulsory education is necessary? Why doesn’t the Universal Declaration of Human Rights condemn compulsory education as a violation of human freedom? On the contrary, the same declaration in its Article 26 considers elementary education as compulsory. Does it negate man’s right to freedom in this matter? No? Why? Because it answers, it is a matter related to human welfare; those who want to remain illiterate and ignorant do not understand. Force must be used to make them literate; coercive measures are essential to render them this service. However, they don’t take a similar approach in regard to religion.”

### **On Western concept of morality:**

The general essence of Islam accords a fundamental role to morality as an important mechanism of instilling discipline and good behavior in a human. Islam’s concept of morality has been further elucidated upon by Mutahhari when he takes on Western thinkers through some of his writings, arguing that their views and approaches to the question of morality is to say the least defective while presenting the Islamic alternative which he believes “to be more humane and logical” (Mutahhari, 2011). He posits:

Concerning training and upbringing, there emerged among Western scholars a new idea whose essence is that *tarbiyah* is mere nurturing. Since they confined their discussion to moral training, reason and willpower and did not touch on religious feeling or aesthetic sense, they asserted that ‘training’ means mere nurturing of the intellectual faculty and moral willpower and nothing else, and man must not be habituated to anything – good or bad for habit is absolutely bad because when a thing becomes a habit, it rules over man and he becomes accustomed to it.

### **On western historical materialism:**

The analysis of Mutahhari’s criticism of historical materialism is based on (but not limited to) the pseudo-Islamic views of one Iraqi *Shia* intellectual in the person of Dr. Ali Al-Wardi who attempted to analyze Marxist ideology from Islamic perspectives. He had argued in his book which, according to Mutahhari is entitled *Manzilat – al – aqli – al bashari* (The Place of Human Intellect). He allegedly used Islamic phraseology in driving home his point while giving a measure of Islamic dose to the ideas and thoughts of such ideologues as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Montesquieu. Mutahhari points out that this approach to the study of

society and history – especially when it is tinged with Islamic colour and bears the stamp of Islamic acceptability, for enhancing its authority and worth, is a grave danger for the thought and teachings of Islam. He considers it essential to investigate and analyze the problems which may otherwise lead to the misunderstanding that Islam considers economy as the basis of society and regards history as being materialistic in essence (Mutahhari, 1985a). As such, moderation, which is the hallmark of Islam prominently features in the above criticism of historical materialism which Mutahhari sees from the perspectives of the following Qur’anic verses:

“Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet: women and sons; heaped up hoards of gold and silver; horses branded (for blood and excellence); and (wealth of) cattle and well tilled land. Such are the possessions of this world’s life; but in nearness of Allah is the best of the goals (to return to). Say: Shall I give you glad tidings of things better than those? For the righteous are gardens in nearness to their Lord, with rivers flowing beneath; therein is their eternal home; with Companions pure (and holy); and the good pleasure of Allah. For in Allah’s sight are (all) His servants (Quran, 3:14-15)”

### **On societal role of religion:**

While defending the positive role intended for religion in human society by the Creator, Ayatollah Mutahhari posits it imperative for humans to have a balanced outlook of religion so as not to be pessimistic about what religion has to contribute to society to ensure its vibrancy and vitality. He looks at religion as a positive phenomenon through which the human race would achieve a realistic appreciation of the Lord’s wisdom while at the same time ensuring that the world becomes a better place for all its inhabitants. Mutahhari sees religion as a teaching which sees the world as a place where one would and should work for whatever he wants as recompense in the hereafter (Mutahhari, 2000):

“A human being has another capacity which goes beyond this worldly affections; the capacity to have ideal. This is the type of love and affection which is bad desires and affection and kind of talent which are at the level of being one of the necessary means of life. The talent of having ideals, however, is a special talent which found its source in the profound essence of humanity, and is unequally human. The prophets did not come to destroy desires and affections, or to dry up their source.”

An ideal person in Mutahhari’s view is the one whose love for materialism is low and whose quest for the spirituality is always on the higher side. He is referring to the materialistic tendency which has nearly sunk Western societies and making an apparent appeal to the Muslim psyche to follow the balance provided in Islam between materialism and spirituality.

In line with his Quranic beliefs, Mutahhari is only responding to the following Quranic verse vis-a-viz the importance of da’wah (Call for Islam):

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (He who is ) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)” (Quran, 49:13).

### **On Marxist ideology:**

While refuting some claims held by certain Iranian youths who had been influenced by Marxist theories and ideologies, Mutahhari wrote a book in order to defend knowledge from the

Islamic perspective. He discusses the importance of knowledge from Islamic perspective and brings into focus the views of such philosophers as Ibn Sina, Ghazali, Kant and Hegel. He also discusses a whole range of issues including the nature of knowledge, stages of knowing, the unconscious mind and the truth (Mutahhari, 1986). He explains further:

“If we take mystical stations into account, knowledge has multiple stages. It has ten stages and according to a certain account, it has a hundred stages, and according to yet another account, it has a thousand stages. However, according to one account, it has only one stage because all of them emanate from a single source, i.e. the heart, and there are no other sources. These are schools of thought which maintain a single stage (of knowledge).”

The Marxist ideology was a prevailing ideology during the time of Mutahhari which had a deep influence on Iranian youth. That ideology just like capitalism, was tackled head – on by Mutahhari with a view to bringing back those misguided elements into the fold of Islam and infuse in them. the spiritual love full of *tawhid* (oneness of God).

The essence of the Islamic ideology as a dominating force in Islamic theological foundations has consistently played a pivotal role in the submissions of Mutahhari as can be clearly observed. Another noteworthy observation is the unapologetic stance he chose to embrace in his style and presentation.

### **On description of a perfect man:**

Mutahhari’s description of a perfect man is another note – worthy aspect of how he distinguished between the worldly and the spiritual. The worldly which means materialism is deeply rooted in whatever man intends to amass in both an oppressive and sanctimonious manner. He also believes that Gnosticism or renunciation of the world is acceptable in Islam in a limited rather than a wholesome manner (Mutahhari, 1985b):

“Thus, the perfect man of the Qur’an, besides his inclination to intellect and heart, has also an inclination to nature. Another question is that of self – renunciation. Gnosticism respects the heart but scores the self and believes in its abandonment. This, in itself; is right and Islam accepts it. But there are two types of self in Islam one of which is regarded and the other is applauded by Islam. This is like a friend and an enemy placed side – by –side while our target of shooting is the enemy in which case we must aim very carefully not to hit the friend. That self which is to be crushed is meanness and vileness, and the other self which must be preserved is the source of all human values.”

### **On Colonialism:**

Ayatollah Mutahhari while criticizing the negative impact colonialism on Muslim nations states that without the undermining of the Islamic culture, colonialism would not have been, successful on Muslim countries or if it was to be successful, the influence would have been minimal. To him, the colonialists were well aware of how dear the values of Islam were to the Muslims and ensured that the rich culture was taken away from them only to be replaced with an ‘alien’ and godless culture. He says that the main problem is that of colonialism. Political and economic colonization would not have been successful if and unless cultural colonization succeeded first. The main requirement for such a success is the shattering of the people’s belief in their culture and history. Colonialism has fully realized through experience that the sole culture upon which Muslims rely and the ideology which they feel proud of, are those of Islam.

The rest are mere words which do not survive outside conferences and seminars, and thus do not pose any threat to the public at large (Mutahhari, 1989).

### **Conclusion:**

Ayatollah Mutahhari, through his works analyzed above, can be taken as a Muslim theologian whose writings on Westernization cover various aspects. He delves on most fundamental issues concerning the Muslim social – cum – spiritual realm ranging from education to gender, from economics to politics and from ideological issues to personal – all having to do with how the West portrays Islam thus portraying it negatively.

His criticism of the above issues bears a significant semblance to an enrichment of Islamic thought and a comparative analysis of the facts and events, It is therefore not surprising that despite his traditional Islamic background which had its genesis in the *madrasah* of Fariman and later at Qum, his success in combining that rich background to the modern scholarship experienced at Tehran University, coupled with his contact with various works of numerous scholars of various shades, persuasion and backgrounds helped in his ability to do an intellectual surgery of Westernization and its effects and impacts on the Muslim psyche and the *ummah* generally.

In the annals of Muslim history therefore, Mutahhari was not only assured a pride of place as a cleric or a revolutionary whose mention is a compelling phenomenon in modern Islamic history, but he was as well an ideologue, a philosopher and an academic whose contribution constitutes a pride to Islam and whatever the religion stands for.

### **References**

- Davari, M. (1997). *The Life and Thoughts of Murtada Mutahhari*, London, Amazo Publishers. pp. 5-8
- Mutahhari M. (1986). Tehran, *Islam and Marxism*, Islamic Propagation Organization. pp. 52-55.
- Mutahhari, M. (1981). *The Rights of Women in Islam*, Tehran, World Organization for Islamic Services, P. 114
- Mutahhari, M. (1982). *The Concept of Islamic Republic*, Tehran, Bonyad Bethet publication, p. 19.
- Mutahhari, M. (1985a). *Society and History*, Tehran, Islamic Propagation Organization, P. 102.
- Mutahhari, M. (1985b). *Perfect Man*, Tehran, Bonyad Bethat Institute, pp.78-79.
- Mutahhari, M. (1989). On Westernization. *Revolution Review Magazine* vol. 2 No.12 Jan – Feb 1989.
- Mutahhari, M. (1991). Islam and the Freedom of Thought and Belief in *At – Tawhid Journal* vol-9 No, 2, pp. 158- 159.



Mutahhari, M. (2000). *Islam and Education*, Tehran, World Ahi-ul-Bayt Foundation, pp. 90-93.

Mutahhari, M. (2011). *Training and Education in Islam*, Tehran, Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies, p. 68.