

Islam Today

By Akbar S. Ahmed. London: I.B. Tauris 1998, 272 pp.

As we approach the end of this alarming century there is a quiet sense of urgency that the West come to understand the Muslim world. Although these ancient rivals have clashed for over a thousand years — politically, intellectually, culturally, and socially — it is not so much in the field of battle wherein has lain the danger but in the world of ideas. A vitriolic polemic, begun with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, plays itself out today in images of book burning fanatics, darkly veiled women and unstable nations willing to go to war on the mere whisper of the word jihad. This has been a history of disinformation and stereotypes that has served a single purpose: war — only this time the stakes are far higher. Propaganda that was once concerned with moral licentiousness and sexual fantasy has largely been replaced with one of violence and modern weapons, and the capitalist nature of wealth accumulation. The world is overshadowed by a battle for its resources that threatens to develop into an all-out war. In light of this and the sizeable number of Muslims living in the West, it is imperative that the climate of fear be diffused and a forum for dialogue and understanding initiated. While the media tire-

lessly labors to define East-West relations in its own terms, Professor Akbar Ahmed has written a book that endeavors to promote a deep understanding, knowledge and respect for Islam — its history, peoples, and achievements. In so doing, he opens new, more interactive, and peaceful parameters for a debate that argues that the differences between the two civilizations are far outweighed by their deeper and more permanent value systems.

The book is a logically structured analysis, concisely written and easy to read. The author examines the basic features of Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet to whom it was revealed; the history of the golden age of Islam when its empires were the superpowers of their day providing stability and order and generating great architecture, art and science; issues of modernity, democracy, and identity, including the core unit of Muslim society, the family; the reality of Muslims living in non-Muslim countries and the problems and issues they face; and finally, the power and strength of Western media as well as the technological developments that challenge traditional Islamic values and beliefs. Being a thorough and complete study of the Islamic faith and its people, the book does not attempt to hide some of the harsher realities, such as corrupt leaders and dishonest individuals who, by violating Islamic laws and customs, can no longer be considered as behaving according to the principles of Islam, and should therefore not be confused in the West as representatives or followers of the faith.

The first two chapters, and in essence the first half of the book, provide a detailed narrative of Islamic history, from the emergence of the Prophet Muhammad through to the great achievements of Islamic civilization in the powerful Arab dynasties, Muslim Spain and the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires. To alleviate the boredom of a tedious account of academic history, the author cleverly structures his argument around many of the colorful symbols and events of the Islamic world, instantly familiar to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, such as "the mosque at Cordoba," "Women in the Harem" and "Taj Mahal: monument of love." Although the author admits that this selective dip into Muslim history is simply an "impressionistic view" not restricted by regular chronological sequences, some could argue that these titles only serve to reinforce an already stereotyped image of Islam; however, one must also concede that this style of narrative makes sense. Indeed, for far too long the history of this faith has been written in terms of the wars it has fought and the kingdoms it has won. If the aim of the author is to unlock an understanding of Muslim society, it is only logical that he should write what he claims to be "the Muslim view of history" and not the one of confrontation so often epitomized in the depiction of the crusades. Moreover, the placing of such a controversial issue as that of the harem into historical perspective is extremely important in tackling one of the most negative images of Islam prevalent in the Western psyche, namely, the sensual depiction and subservient status of its women.

The harem and the women's bathhouse were frequent subjects for the orientalist school of painters. The harem is extravagant and vulgar — it is Orientalism, the stuff of European fantasy; it is not Islam. So much wealth, so much suffering, so much injustice are far from the ideas of marriage and married life in Islam. The verses from the Qur'an that are so prominent on the walls do not condone the spirit of the place.

The account also makes for some very interesting reading with colorful anecdotes and insightful incidences, many of which expose the already deepening weaknesses of the empire — especially in relation to its leaders whose actions would be the downfall of the Muslim world.

Although presented at a very general level, the author also initiates a good discussion on the Sunni-Shi'i divide, as well as delving with obvious admiration into Islam's "tolerant, mystical and universal philosophy" — Sufism. Although one would have relished a more detailed intercultural comparison between the Sunni and Shi'i branches, the author has chosen to clarify some of the more obvious issues in order to show that the differences between the two are, at the core, minimal and lie more deeply in their customs and practices. In a small yet intriguing section devoted to Shi'ism in Western media, the author correctly emphasizes that many of the television and photo-journalistic images of Islam used today are, in effect, shortcut propaganda tools that originated during the Iranian revolution when the bearded shouting mullahs, the women veiled from head to toe, and the men wielding Kalashnikovs, became the images of Islam disseminated throughout the world. The intriguing dip into Sufism, the universal way, however, is a little less convincing. For the general reader it is an evocative look at Islam's spiritual side, but for the informed Muslim — the mastery of the Shari'ah and the seriousness of the *tariqah* aside — the seemingly uncritical look into the cultural existence of "shrines" and "saints" is a little more than problematic, although the author does accept that Sufism has acquired some distinctly un-Islamic practices. For the author personally, Sufism's message of compassion, humility and universal love is attractive and inspiring, and it is on this level that he concentrates his discussion.

The second half of the book, which opens with chapter four, is by far the most important, analytical, and stimulating. Following through with his earlier historical discussion on the Ottoman, Saffavid and Mughal empires, the author focuses on developments in modern Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan and how these relate to the three empires from which they derive so much cultural inspiration. Unusually, the great political and contemporary relevance of the Arab world is relegated to the margins of the discussion and the reasons for this are clear. Indeed, the vast majority of Muslims do not live in the Arab world, and the great dynasties and historical achievements of its people span an area far beyond traditional Arab borders. The great nations of the Far East, Central Asia, South Asia, Turkey, and Iran have a history as Islamically intense as that of the Arabs. It is purely in the interests of Western media to downplay Islam's world-wide significance and confine it and its

followers to an area known as "the Middle East" — oil producing nations with the Pharaohs thrown in. Precisely because this artificial reality has become so ingrained in the Western psyche, Akbar Ahmed channels his discussion outside such established parameters.

The discussion on Turkey revolves around the dilemma of its great Islamic legacy as compromised by its need for tourist revenue — or, more aptly, the mosque versus the nudist beach predicament. The author argues that what Kemal Ataturk had buried in his contempt for the past, is today resurfacing in the shape of tentative attempts to revive the hijab, the fez, and the fully attended mosque. One would have preferred a more expanded discussion on Turkey's obsession with Europe, but this is sacrificed in favor of clarifying the parameters of a debate currently raging in Turkey on how Islamic the Turkish past at the time of the Ottomans was. An accurate but short account of the legacy of Ataturk is followed by a more detailed examination of Turkey's Islamic revivalism, with the carefully observed remark that although the trend toward Islam is becoming self-evident, no large-scale political movement to this effect exists. There is also a perceptive and well-noted link made with the newly independent republics of Central Asia for whom Turkey, due to their historical identity, is a viable model. Although well written the author skirts around some explosively critical issues. For instance, the correct juxtaposition of Turkey's dilemma in the modern world should have focused in far more detail on its military problems: Greek antagonism, Turkish-occupied parts of Cyprus, and its militant Kurdish population that claims independence and a separate homeland.

The introduction to Iran is ingeniously divided into two mirror images: the Shah's palace in the North and the burial place of the Ayatollah Khomeini in the South. Capturing in a single moment what an entire book would have taken to explain, these two images reflect the whole cultural, political, and religious story of Iran's modern Islamic quest. In sharp contrast to the grim, characterless, office block appearance of the Shah's palace which offers no hint of Islamic culture and history, the Ayatollah's mausoleum is steeped in classic Persian Muslim architecture. Weaving together the strands of Shi'ism, the oscillation in society between the dynastic principle of powerful kings and that of pious religious figures, and finally the geopolitics of the post-Second World War era which demanded that the newly emerged nations ally with one of the two superpowers (the Shah firmly placing Iran in the American camp), the author attempts to unravel the intercultural, political and extremely complex set of factors that comprise the modern Iranian nation. A respectful and factual account of Khomeini's rise to power is given with emphasis on his "larger than life" importance in the psyche of the Iranian people. Having dealt, in his earlier examination of Shi'ism, on the importance of the twelve imams and the imamate doctrine, the reader at this stage is well placed to understand and appreciate the reverence with which the late Ayatollah was and indeed still is held today. Since the unfortunate fatwa on Salman Rushdie, this has been one of the single most important flash-points for East-West misunderstanding, and

Akbar Ahmed rightly concentrates on placing the matter into context, substituting the image of the crazy cleric — as the West sought to depict Khomeini — with that of the scholar-cleric turned political leader.

Tensions in the Arab world and the creation of the state of Israel are factors summarily examined, although, understandably, it is difficult to do justice to such complex topics in an introductory reader. A wider and far more in-depth look at the Palestinian question could however have been feasible since this is an important core of the Middle East problem and one of the flash points of Arab resentment toward the West. Wide disparities in income between the ruling elite and the rest of the population are not peculiar to the Muslim world and do not need much discussion. The author offers an almost apologetic account of Muslim attempts at democracy given that, in its pure form, it is also not found anywhere in the West. In his case study of Algeria, however, the author does bring in much of the political commentary needed to make the discussion relevant and astute, correctly pointing to “the double standards” employed by the West in turning a blind eye to the plight of the Algerians; it seems that democracy only functions when “the right party” comes to power. Needless to say, no tears were shed in the West at the death of democracy in Algeria. There is also no analysis of one of the most important East-West relationships of all, that of trade. The triumph of capitalism, with its paradox of infinite growth in a world of finite resources, should have been juxtaposed against the far more superior humanism of Islam’s established trade routes and noninterest bearing financial instruments. It has also become an established fact that the Gulf war was fought to protect oil interests and not the Kuwaiti people.

Attempting to explain and put into context some of the more controversial topics with which the media constantly vilifies Islam, a series of sections are devoted to Islamic punishment, polygamy, arranged marriages, the status of Muslim women, and the hijab. Akbar Ahmed argues that Islam does not mean the subordination of women, contempt for other religions, opposition to the modern world, or barbaric punishments for petty crime. These are the products of a long history of stereotyping and conflict that has fostered ignorance. The justice and humanism of Islam are stressed, and in contrast to the sensationalist hysteria of the media, the sociological realities of these practices are put into well-defined and correct perspectives.

An exploration of how Muslim minorities throughout the world struggle to maintain their identities and ideals in uncomprehending or hostile environments contains a chilling reference to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosova. According to the author, no other religion in the world has so many of its people trapped in an alien environment; and when, in such fragile circumstances, slogans of jihad are thoughtlessly brandished by both the media and certain Islamic groups, a climate of confrontation is quickly created with the Muslim minorities often caught in the cross-fire. The author expresses his surprise at the inexplicable fear that Muslim minorities arouse in others, but this is hardly a riddle given the histo-

ry of Islam's great conquests and achievements: it is regarded as a focus of conflict and a powerful competitor whether on the political, economic, religious, or cultural level. A thought-provoking and controlled commentary on the media contains many insights into the reality of its dismal use by the Muslims as well as its utilization more as a weapon than a source of information by the West. It is perfectly valid and true to say that Muslims have yet to discover how to use the media to project ideas and images of their own culture and civilization. The failure to do so has cost them heavily and the great injustices done to them are barely mentioned or criticized. As a powerful illustration of his argument the author examines the role of the media in the first real major action of the new world order: the Gulf War. Indeed, few reported the realities of this terrible war which was televised from beginning to end like a Hollywood movie, with good guys and bad guys and a happy ending. The viable and promising channels for debate opened by the Iraqi government to discuss avenues of withdrawal went unreported, and in all the euphoria and jingoism whipped up by the press, the death of such a terrible number of men, women, and children went unnoticed.

This is a well-researched, well-written, and carefully structured book written by an author who has obviously tried hard to be objective, controlled, and understanding in his analysis of East-West relations and the place of Muslims in the world at large. He has succeeded not only in presenting Islam as the dignified faith that it is, but also in portraying the tolerance with which it is lived, understood and viewed by the majority of Muslims today.

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