

## Islam

**The choice facing Muslims**

Apr 16th 2009

From The Economist print edition

FOR those (and they are many) who are convinced by the thesis that the West and its values are under remorseless siege from a menacing and resurgent Islam, Ali Allawi's antithesis may seem a little surprising, even absurd. But the author is a distinguished Iraqi who has twice served in post-Saddam governments in Baghdad and whose last, much-acclaimed book was a searing indictment of American (and Iraqi) failings. Though the two books tackle very different themes, what they have in common is their author's intimate knowledge of both Islam and the West, and his unflinching honesty.

Mr Allawi calls his new book an "attempt to understand the factors behind the decay of the spirit of Islam". He locates this decay not in the personal piety of the world's Muslims—which remains vibrant—but in the collective failure of Muslims, over the past 200 years, to come up with an adequate and effective response to Western modernity. The problem is not that Islam is incapable of finding its own path to modernity. Mr Allawi wholly rejects the popular notion that Islam is inherently incompatible with tolerance, democracy, women's rights—in short, all that the West holds dear.

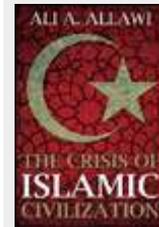
The difficulty, he says, is that the predominant Muslim response to the Western challenge has been narrowly political instead of being rooted in the inherited ethos of Islamic civilisation. Seen in this light, the Islamist movements which have received so much attention since the Islamic revival in the 1970s are shallow and passionate. For all their pretence of offering an "Islamic alternative", they represent, or so he argues, nothing more than Western modernity in Islamic garb.

Mr Allawi calmly and methodically deconstructs an Islamic revival which has failed to live up to its promise. Islamist movements and secular governments anxious to pay lip-service to Islam have, between them, failed spectacularly to anchor themselves in genuinely Islamic principles: principles which, for Mr Allawi, are as much about inner spirituality as outward religiosity. The results are everywhere to be seen. Autocratic governments abuse human rights, whether in Islamic Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan or in secular Egypt and Syria. Economies are corrupt and maladministered, and their supposed ethical principles, such as Islamic banking, are a sham. There has been a profound loss of cultural creativity, apparent, for example, in the decay of the Islamic city and its time-honoured traditions of craftsmanship, piety and community.

Mr Allawi buttresses his case with some striking statistics: "The creative output of the twenty or thirty million Muslims of the Abbasid era [750-1258] dwarfs the output of the nearly one-and-a-half billion Muslims of the modern era." Per head, the income of the

**The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation**

By Ali A. Allawi



Yale University Press; 304 pages; \$27.50 and £18.99

Buy it at  
[Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)  
[Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk)

wealthiest Muslim country (the United Arab Emirates) is 200 times that of the poorest (Somalia).

Is there a solution? Mr Allawi, himself a Shia Muslim, believes the mystical (or Sufi) tradition must be an integral part of the revival of Islamic civilisation. But here too—although Sufism retains a strong grassroots following in several parts of the Muslim world—he finds himself at odds with both the modernist and puritanical (Wahhabi) strands of Islam, which disdain the individualistic heterodoxy of “folk Islam”.

The West has not helped. Mr Allawi castigates the hysterical Islamophobia which came in the wake of the attacks of September 2001, as well as the hubristic attempts to “reform” Islam in the name of defeating terrorism. He insists that the challenge of recapturing the “spirit of Islam” is a task for Muslims, not outsiders. The stark choice for the Muslim world is between the revival of its civilisation, difficult as that is to achieve, and its secularisation—“the dissolution of Islam into modernity”. Mr Allawi is not sanguine.

The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation.

By Ali A. Allawi.

*Yale University Press; 304 pages; \$27.50 and £18.99*