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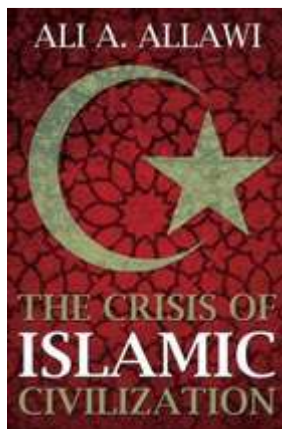
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Islam's difficult road

Modern Muslims face hard choices, says Kishwer Falkner

The 1960s social and cultural revolution in the west did not leave the world of Ali Allawi's Baghdad untouched, nor that of Karachi, the city of my upbringing. Greater familiarity with western liberal values, through foreign film and literature, manifested itself in a limited yet alien sexual permissiveness. It also brought Islamic societies into closer contact with the ideas of democracy, free speech and secularism. This ran alongside the rise of nationalism that was sweeping the developing world in the wake of decolonisation and was joined in the 1970s by the emergence of political Islam.



The maelstrom of change in the late 20th century only served to accelerate the demise of traditional Islamic society, a process under way since the First World War. The Muslim world emerged from these tumultuous decades significantly poorer and more unequal. Its per capita income is only 10 per cent of that in the west. At the same time, extremes of wealth and poverty co-exist within it. Within the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, an association of 57 Muslim states, the per capita income of the 14 oil exporters is seven times that of the poorest 21 countries.

The story of the resurgence of Islam is in many ways the story of the backlash against western modernity and of the contradictions in Muslim societies. But Muslim rejection of untrammelled consumption and heightened individualism has resulted in an elevation of an outward religiosity at the cost of a deeper sense of the good life. It is unlikely to restore a genuine Islamic civilisation at peace with itself and the outside world. Grappling with these themes of change and crisis, Ali A Allawi, a former minister in the Iraqi postwar governments, provides a survey of Muslim theology, philosophy and history. *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation* takes the reader through two centuries of Islam's retreat in the face of imperialism, modernity and globalisation, followed by persistent attempts at renewal.

For Allawi, the revival of the spirit of Islam must be centred on restoring the notion of the sacred, in its spiritual and intellectual dimensions. At the heart of this reordering is sharia - not the western caricature of a medieval penal system, but the pathway to guidance and felicity, to realise virtue as the bridge that connects the human with the divine.

The author thus draws a sharp line between himself and Muslim secularists. Writing in a reflective style which barely masks his underlying certainty, Allawi argues that the modernisers have been seduced by a certainty of scientific knowledge to the extent that they are now Muslim in name alone. Striving for a rationalist world view, they seek an à la carte approach to the fundamentals of Islam, jettisoning the inconvenience of Islamic legal and customary norms. Worse, for Allawi, they seek to update the religion in light of scientific knowledge and technological progress.

His scepticism towards a fusion of Islam with western ideals is most evident in the chapter entitled "Human Rights and Human Duties". For Allawi, modern human rights are divorced from their ethical or religious roots. Their supposed universality is given concrete reality by laws and institutions, none of which has any overarching ethical framework. Western ideas of human rights are founded in a belief in individual human agency. In contrast, an Islamic interpretation attaches them to a nexus of obligations, responsibilities and duties to others and, above all, to God. This leaves those Muslims who conform to western values of equality and free expression with an unbridgeable divide. You are either one or the other.

Against the backdrop of a recent surge in books about Islam and the West, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation* is a rare find. Using the western lexicon, Allawi shows why the status quo will not do for the majority of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims. Still, he fails to spell out what the shape of a restored Islamic civilisation would look like in practical terms. The central question - can a modern society be built on the vision of the divine? - remains unanswered. Allawi does not show us the edifice, but identifies enough of the foundations for us to decide if we want to continue building. Its architecture may not speak to a liberally minded Muslim, but its authenticity is beyond doubt.

Kishwer Falkner is a Liberal Democrat peer in the House of Lords. To order *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation* for £17.99 with free UK p&p, go to observer.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6847