

Book Review: Rise and decline of Islamic civilisation

By Muhammad Khan

The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation. By Ali A Allawi, London: Yale University Press, pp287, 2009, PB, £18.99

Muslim Civilisation: The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform. By M Umer Chapra, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp225, 2008, PB, £12.00

The birth of Islamic civilisation was a sudden, unexpected and unparalleled event in the history of humanity.

Back in the seventh century, there were two superpowers in the world, namely the Holy Roman Empire (its eastern wing was known as the Byzantine Empire) and the Persian Empire. At the time, these two superpowers considered Arabia to be a strategically unimportant, economically impoverished and politically insignificant part of the world. The Bedouins of the desert were regarded by the prosperous and cultured Persians and Byzantines to be illiterate, uncivilised and a backward people whose presence would not have been mentioned even by the historians.

At that time, a child was born in the Arabian citadel of Makkah in 570CE, who was destined to transform the course of human history forever: his name was Muhammad (peace be on him). Described as a 'luminous light' by the Qur'an, the Prophet blazed a trail which transformed the fortunes of Arabia and thereby inspired the desert Arabs to become the pioneers of history's greatest civilisation. Within a century after the death of the Prophet, the Arabs had reached as far as Spain in the West and the Indus Valley in the East, swiftly overtaking the Persian and Byzantine Empires, to become the powerful force in the world. The emergence of Islam as a religious, political and economic force went hand in hand with its educational, cultural, artistic and spiritual depth and power. In the unfolding of human history, there has never been another global civilisation like it.

After nearly a thousand years of unrivalled innovation, contribution and achievements in all spheres of human endeavour, during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Muslim world began to experience serious decline and disintegration. The emergence of leading European powers, coupled with their subjugation and colonisation of a large part of the Muslim world, marked a serious setback to Islamic



progress and advancement.

This state of affairs inspired scores of Muslim intellectuals and reformers to emerge during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to reawaken the Muslim world from its sleep and slumber. 'Amir al-Bayan' Shakib Arslan (1869-1946), was one such intellectual and reformer. An associate of both Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, he wrote a series of articles in the famous al-Manar journal under the title of Li Madha Ta'aakhkaru al-Muslimun wa Li Madha Taqaddama Ghayruhum (Why Muslims are Backward and why Others have Progressed?) during the early part of the twentieth century. In these articles, Arslan argued that the main causes of Islamic decline were the Muslim unwillingness to take initiative, be proactive and the absence of intellectual creativity (ijtihad) within the Islamic world. Not much has changed since. No wonder then that Ali Allawi and Umer Chapra have written their books to explore this issue in considerable detail.

Allawi was educated in the UK and US and became a Minister in the Iraqi post-war governments. His first book, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (1997), was a thoughtful reflection on the present condition of his country and its future direction. Now a Visiting Fellow at Princeton, Allawi's book under review is a challenging and ambitious effort on his part to tackle the question Arslan attempted to answer nearly a century ago. However, unlike Arslan who was an imminent Islamic reformist and scholar, Allawi is a former politician who hails from a wealthy Iraqi family and this book appears to be his first on an Islamic subject. Also, whereas Arslan spoke of 'decline' and 'backwardness' in relation to Islamic civilisation, Allawi's approach is more apocalyptic, that is to say, he thinks the Islamic civilisation is currently going through a serious 'crisis' and it is highly likely that this crisis could lead to the demise of Islamic civilisation unless serious steps are taken to resolve this crisis.

Unlike Allawi, Chapra's analysis of the current condition of the Ummah (global Islamic community) is more academic and less alarmist. What, however, appears to be true is that, unlike Arslan, both Allawi and Chapra's discourse on the 'crisis' or 'decline' of the Ummah has been invariably influenced by the 'clash of civilisation' discourse first initiated by Bernard Lewis in 1990 and subsequently popularised by Samuel Huntington in 1993 and 1998. However, in 2002, Lewis published his *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* and, in this book, he wrote, "What went wrong? For a long time people in the Islamic world,

especially but not exclusively in the Middle East, have been asking this question. The content and formulation of the question, provoked primarily by their encounter with the West, vary greatly according to the circumstances, events, and duration of that encounter and the events that first made them conscious, by comparison, that all was not well in their society. But whatever the form and manner of the question and of the answers that it evokes, there is no mistaking the growing anguish, the mounting urgency, and of late the seething anger with which both question and answers are expressed." (p3)

Both Allawi and Chapra's books appear to be two different responses to the same issue raised by Lewis. Given the desperate existential condition of Iraq at the moment, it is not surprising that Allawi's discourse is tinged with great urgency, if not, alarmism. "The crisis of Islamic civilisation," he argues, "arises partly from the fact that it has been thwarted from demarcating its own pathways into contemporary life. The western mould of modernity has been superimposed on its worldview, and Islam has been unable to relate to the modern world except through this awkward and often painfully alien framework...The unease as to where Islamic civilization is heading, or is being pushed, provides the underpinning for the stream of projects to 'reform' or 'revitalise' Islam. These have continued uninterrupted from the early nineteenth century to the present. They all relied on a reinventing of Islam by secularising, liberalising, historicising or radicalising Muslims' understanding of their religion. All these schemes have so far failed to stop the erosion of the vitality of Islamic civilization. One can only conclude, therefore, that individual and societal regeneration in Islam has either passed the point of no return or its roots must be sought elsewhere than in the prescriptions of Islam's would be reformers." (pp9-10)

In other words, Allawi is of the opinion that Islam as a spiritual force is alive and well but its external manifestation or practical dimension is currently suffering from an unprecedented crisis. In his own words, "There is little doubt that the civilization of Islam is undergoing a monumental crisis. In one form or another, this crisis has been going on for well over two hundred years...The world which Islam had built over the centuries – its civilization in the broadest sense of the word – has been seriously undermined. How this came about and whether the damage inflicted on Islamic civilization is terminal or not is the subject of this book." (p1)

Although Allawi's book consists of eleven chapters of roughly equal length, he begins by providing a brief

historical overview of Islam's encounter with the West, followed by consideration of changes which took place as a result of this encounter, and finally he assesses the impact of western domination of the Muslim world and its erosive consequences on the practical dimension of Islam as a political power, economic might and cultural force.

Even though Allawi does acknowledge that his book is not an academic work, he fails to clearly define what he means by 'Islamic civilization' as a distinct spiritual force on the one hand and an outer or practical expression on the other – and what the relationship between the two dimensions are is in the context of his analysis.

Nevertheless, Allawi's central argument appears to be that Islam as a political, economic and cultural force is spent, and the only way it can be regenerated again is by focusing on its spiritual dimension which he says has remained alive and well.

He is of the opinion that the prescriptions suggested by the secular humanists as well as the 'Islamic fundamentalists' are not the real solutions to the problems of the Muslim world; instead, he argues that the views of the Traditionalist School is a possible panacea.

Inspired by the writings of Rene Guenon, and popularised by Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the proponents of this School argue that all major world religions, if practised in their original forms, are equally valid and could lead to salvation in the hereafter. They are also highly critical of the modern world and the philosophies which influenced modern thoughts and ideas (see Nasr's *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York, 1989, for more details).

Allawi's endorsement of the ideas and thoughts of this School without subjecting them to critical analysis prove (if proof was required) that his book is a rushed effort.

Unlike Allawi, Chapra is an acclaimed economist and Islamic scholar whose *Towards a Just Monetary System* (1985) won him both the Islamic Development Bank Award and King Faisal International Award in 1990. If Allawi (a former politician) is prone to seeing things in political terms, then Chapra is prone to seeing things in economic terms. Influenced by Ibn Khaldun's theory of the rise and decline of civilization, Chapra begins his book by raising 'Some Critical Questions' (pp1-16). "One of these," argues Chapra, "concerns the factors that

have led the Muslim world to this weak position after having enjoyed a glorious past...Efforts to answer this question bring into focus another important question about the factors that enabled Muslims to perform extremely well in the earlier centuries of Islam. Did Islam play a positive role in the earlier rise of Muslims? If this earlier rise was due to Islam, then why has it now become ineffective in enabling the Muslims to improve their condition? Could it be that while Islam was able to contribute to their rise in the past, it is no longer capable of enabling them to respond successfully to the newer challenges they face in modern times? If, however, Islam is not the cause of Muslim malaise, then what is to blame?" (p2).

In other words, Chapra is of the view that the cause(s) of Muslim decline need to be determined first before consideration can be given to the question of reform and regeneration.

After outlining Ibn Khaldun's theory of the development and decline of civilisation, Chapra provides a historical, political, economic and sociological overview of the conditions which led to the decline of the Muslim world. As expected, his analysis of the economic condition is much more powerful and convincing than his historical, political and sociological analysis; indeed, his views concerning the role of Sufism in the decline of the Muslims is not only weak but also unsubstantiated.

After 163 pages of analysis of the different reasons for the decline of Muslims, the author devotes barely 30 pages to the highly pertinent topic of 'Need for Reform.'

In fact, both Allawi and Chapra are strong on analysing the cause(s) of 'decline' or 'crisis' of the Islamic world but they are very weak on suggestions for reform or regeneration. This is because it is easier to analyse the past in order to highlight its glories or criticise its failings than explore the present condition in order to make suggestions for improvement in the future. The former process is carried out almost entirely on the basis of historical facts and data while the accomplishment of the latter is largely dependent on innovative solutions fostered by intellectual creativity and fresh thinking. And, as we know, today the Muslim world is desperately suffering from a chronic shortage of fresh and creative thinkers in all fields of human knowledge and endeavour.

Nevertheless, as both Chapra and Allawi repeatedly point out, the 'sense of the transcendent in Islam' has remained intact to this day and this, in the words of Allawi, should enable Muslims to "reclaim those parts

of their public spaces which have been conceded to other worldviews over the past centuries. A new Islamic civilization can only be carved out from a harsh reality of years of inactivity, lassitude and indifference. And, if it is to be achieved, this will be only after overcoming conditions of great imbalance and adversity. The creative impulses of civilization are now all in the domain of another world order. The challenges are not insurmountable. But they will test to the limit the Muslim's commitment to Islam as a complete way of life." (p270)

One may not agree with everything the authors have to say, yet it was a joy to read these two thoughtful, pertinent and informative books, and I have no hesitation in recommending them to others, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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