



The Crisis of Islamic Civilization

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Islam as a religion is central to the lives of over a billion people, but its outer expression as a distinctive civilization has been undergoing a monumental crisis. Buffeted by powerful adverse currents, Islamic civilization today is a shadow of its former self. The most disturbing and possibly fatal of these currents — "the imperial expansion of the West into Muslim lands and the blast of modernity that accompanied it" — are now compounded by a third giant wave, globalization.

These forces have increasingly tested Islam and Islamic civilization for validity, adaptability, and the ability to hold on to the loyalty of Muslims, says Ali A. Allawi in his provocative new book. While the faith has proved resilient in the face of these challenges, other aspects of Islamic civilization have atrophied or died, Allawi contends, and Islamic civilization is now undergoing its last crisis.

The book explores how Islamic civilization began to unravel under colonial rule, as its institutions, laws, and economies were often replaced by inadequate modern equivalents. Allawi also examines the backlash expressed through the increasing religiosity of Muslim societies and the spectacular rise of political Islam and its terrorist offshoots. Assessing the status of each of the building blocks of Islamic civilization, the author concludes that Islamic civilization cannot survive without the vital spirituality that underpinned it in the past. He identifies a key set of principles for moving forward, principles that will surprise some and anger others, yet clearly must be considered. (20090327)

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization Details

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From Reader Review The Crisis of Islamic Civilization for online ebook

Rhesa says

A brilliant scholar & minister of defense in post-Saddam Iraq paints a picture of the "authenticity" of Islamic civilization

Muhammad Azzat says

A great book. Comprehensive idea and critics yet a non-popular idea in the world even in muslim world. Many have stated that Dawlah Isl'miyyah (I don't know what to call either Islamic nation or Nation based on Islam theocratically) is the key to revive Islam's Golden Age. But the author managed to counter this blunt statement with immense substance.

Adrian says

Though similar books have been written on Islam's civilizational crisis, not least of which emanate from the pen of Bernard Lewis, and a few other contemporary scholars of Islam, Dr Ali A Allawi's piece is a breath of fresh air in this crowded genre, not least of which is due to his more in depth understanding of the subject matter, and the broader range of his analysis.

What this book is not, is a diatribe on Western Imperialism, or any other kind of foreign involvement in Muslim countries. Though the book does feature such discussions, Allawi takes the reader through numerous examples of how Islam as a civilization, not as a faith, has come loose of its moorings.

In Allawi's analysis, Islam is not simply a faith practiced individually or amongst communities, rather it is a way of life and worldview, with organizational answers to many aspects of life. These, according to Allawi, have been lost, and the attempts of Wahabbis, Salafists, or other aspects of what Allawi terms "the Islamic revolt" do not provide the answer, rather they exacerbate the problem.

Allawi often alludes to the Sharia as the organizing aspect of Islamic civilization, a word that is undoubtedly loaded and misunderstood. Rather than being a penal code with draconian punishments, the Sharia as understood by Allawi, is a complete system governing community relations, science, art, architecture, and many other areas that are in decline within the Islamic world.

Toward the end, Allawi provides examples of the underperformance of Muslim countries, save those of the Gulf, and how examples of financial reform along Islamic lines, such as Mahathir Bin Mohammad's proposal of an Islamic currency for trading purposes, were both opposed by Washington Consensus Financial Institutions, and received lackluster support among Muslim countries.

Allawi's solutions for the civilizational malaise are not quite clear, at least not from one's first reading, but he correctly demonstrates how Islam has wrongly entered the demonology of Western thinking. Allawi (rightly) contends that the Islamic world was a poor substitute for the Eastern Bloc when the West looked for a new threat to identify following the demise of the old one. Islam lacks no core state, unlike the communist world, is widely fractured and disunited, and many of the accusations in the Western mind are unfounded.

One civilizational flashpoint, for example, the Rushdie affair, and other similar incidents such as the Danish Cartoons, highlight a Western insistence on total freedom of speech. Such a thing is nonexistent even in the West, for example Holocaust denial, and this along with other aspects demonstrate a lack of understanding

on behalf of the West.

Allawi's position on Islamic reformers is not quite clear, though it is clear that he has no sympathy for Salafists and other reactionaries.

The final chapter is an examination of the spiritual aspect of Islam, particularly with regard to the Sufi orders, something that is also in decline, and Allawi contends that there is not only inadequate understanding toward such movements in both the Islamic World and the West, but also that Islam's spirituality is decidedly different from the West in the sense that it is not divorced from Monotheism, the way how other New Age movements are in the West.

Allawi's work is not only a more in depth, scholarly, and broad range analysis of Islam's civilizational malaise, it is also a work that treats Islam through the proper aspect of what it is, a way of life, rather than what the West intends it to be, a faith relegated to the personal domain.

Extra praise is due to the Kindle edition, which features a much more attractive Font, in contrast to the standard Typeset of Kindle Ebooks, along with a very navigable layout.

In short, Allawi's work is a startling treatise on Islam as a civilization that stands head and shoulders above its crowded field, and deserves to be both read, and re-read.

Luna Hasani says

This book is brilliant. I struggled through it at first but then it went on smoothly and beautifully. It talks about the past, current and future states of the Islamic civilization. The author lists the reasons for the decline of the civilization in its different aspects and proposes solutions for its revival. Beautiful read, I recommended to anyone who's interested in this area of research.

Clif says

This heartfelt work of a good man devoted to his religion I would recommend for anyone regardless of their views on religion or Islam in particular.

Religion has been central to all cultures up until the last couple of centuries after the Enlightenment. Why is this?

If a group of humans could start out as babes without parents present, ignorant and isolated from the rest of the world in every way, I've no doubt that a religion would come to be, though a scientific view of the world might well not. Is there any reason Native-American cultures could not have continued as they were indefinitely were it not for European intervention? There certainly are wars in a world of religions but on the large scale the pre-scientific world was sustainable. No one was without a faith in something greater of one kind or another.

Religion comes to us naturally. We are primarily emotional beings in a world that so easily triggers emotions from the towering thunderstorm to the deaths of our fellows. Mortal and therefore anxious about tomorrow, we want an explanation for the world we see around us to give us a sense of control. You and I clearly can't control a flood, a storm or the many natural things that make us feel tiny, so why not create an all-powerful deity that can be placated and that can protect us, even beyond death? Add in the mystery of a mythology and make sure the deity is unseen, existing on a higher plane that puts the frightening world we know under control. But make that deity reachable to us through ritual and prayer. Then, at one remove, we are in control

of our lives and comfort is found in the otherwise very uncomfortable world of human psychology. Can't you almost feel the relief simply from this description?

Should such a natural thing as religion be renounced and followers denounced? Surely not. From what I've said above to be religious is to be human. Religion can be transcended but that is an act of courage that has been so long in taking hold of the world at large.

It is the yearning for the humanity, for community in particular, expressed through religion that comes out strongly in Ali Allawi's book. One can easily empathize. He rightly sees the hollowing out of Islam under the onslaught of Western secular culture but his concern could be equally applied to Christianity in earlier times. The difference is that the crisis for Christianity has largely been passed whereas Islam is undergoing convulsions coming from the confrontation with modernity. The stasis of a culture based on a sacred text with a common creed does not easily coexist with a culture of continual change with no guide to living other than individual preference.

It is the victory of individualism that most troubles the author. Where is morality? Where is courtesy and respect? How does modesty deal with Madonna? When each person is the judge of their own behavior, how can there be a communal sense of the right way to live? To go back to what I wrote above, freedom is frightening. When anything can be done, what should one do?

The Crisis of Islamic Civilization is wide ranging from philosophy to international politics. Allawi does not hesitate to offer criticism where weaknesses of Islam are exposed by Western practice. He is refreshingly open minded while at the same time being impressively informed on both the Islamic and the Western world. Political affairs are found throughout this work. In particular he notes that Islam has no national center of power as, for example, Christianity has in the U.S. or Hinduism in India; the geographic world of Islam is scattered and in large part within borders established by the West.

The victory of scientific thought is easily a tragedy viewed from a religious standpoint. I admit to feeling sadness while reading this book because what the author wishes could be is no longer possible, for any religion. Faith cannot be invented; one cannot make-believe. It was powerful in a world that offered no non-religious view of how things are. Allawi's desire is the return of a way of community living that is disintegrating because the commanding foundation of a God and inerrant scripture are not tenable when science says things are otherwise and proves it with results that cannot be denied. Fanatics of all religions shout that we must go back to the old ways, but with the advent of science that path is closed, increasing the frenzy of reaction but with no hope of it being satisfied.

Though he does not say so, I believe Allawi realizes that The Crisis of Islamic Civilization is a eulogy. It is a beautiful one.

Arithmomaniac says

This book is a thick and challenging read, but is more convincing than most on the civilizational drift and helplessness at the heart of current Islamic unrest. Unfortunately, he is not bold enough to offer a solution.

Nermeen says

the book is so rich with dreams to build Islamic Civilization without any western norm just based on Islamic norms, Sharia Law. it is very interesting to see how the author devoted himself to think about the Islamic Civilization in every aspect of life, Art, human right, economic, politic, but he didn't give formula to how this Civilization could be exists in practical way.

Canada Citizen says

test

Joey says

Allawi's critique of modern Islamic civilization is biting both in its evaluation of Muslims' reaction to modernity in the past 150 years and the Western world's hegemonic insistence that the global community swallow Western political and economic thought and systems. Allawi bemoans modernity's fierce attack on Islam, and his lamentation can be extended also to modernity's decreasing tolerance for religion -- ANY religion -- in the public sphere. I think the author effectively describes, in an Islamic context, the moral consequences of secularism and the soulless shells of once-vital and rich religious heritages that ham-fisted secular policies leave in their wake.

Allawi is pessimistic about Islamic civilization's prospects of rejuvenating itself. Centuries of internal spiritual decay and merciless foreign intervention have relegated this once-proud and forward-looking civilization to a modern backwater of economic poverty, moral bankruptcy, and political marginalization in the global community, Allawi posits.

Many have speculated on how Islam has arrived at its current civilizational nadir. What's refreshing about Allawi's take is that he's fair about placing blame. Too often, Western pundits look no further than Islamic civilization's internal failings to explain why Islam has been pushed to the fringes of our globalized world. Likewise, Muslim authors tend to assert that foreign intervention is the sole source of Islamic civilization's woes. Allawi suggests that both internal AND external currents have pushed the Islamic world to the brink of civilizational collapse.

The most compelling aspect of Allawi's analysis is that Islam's solutions cannot be purely political. To Allawi, political renewal and increased influence for the Islamic world will only follow Muslims' collective reconnection to the spiritual foundations that underlie Islam. These foundational themes include personal piety, virtuous interactions with community, and concern for the collective. They connect the internal and external lives of Muslims, defining personal faith as well as social duties and obligations. And, according to Allawi, Muslims have abandoned these wellsprings of Islam en masse in response to the encroachment of Western political and social culture into the Islamic world over the past 150 years.

Allawi convincingly argues that the Western world's bedrock principles of rugged individualism in the social and economic spheres and democratic political ideals have taken over the world, and Islamic civilization has struggled to handle these new ideas. Which portions of these foreign concepts, if any, should the Islamic world accept? What does acceptance mean? Wholesale adoption or acceptance within Islamic social,

political, cultural, and religious structures? Allawi forcefully notes that the Islamic world's elites stumble over themselves to embrace hyper-consumerism and capitalistic wealth-generation, while the vast majority of Muslims await the "trickle-down" of wealth that won't ever come. He further discounts violent, nihilistic Islamists that aggressively defend outward manifestations of "Islamic-ness" without any sense of the inner, spiritual elements of Islam. The Islam of these Islamists, Allawi contends, is as empty and lifeless as the market-brand Islam of the oil-rich Gulf states and the staid and sterile Islam that Westernized Muslim elites practice -- when convenient -- as a mere token of their otherwise forgotten heritage.

I believe Allawi is correct that for Islamic civilization to have any hope of becoming a meaningful player in the global community it must re-moor itself to its spiritual anchors. The Christian West has long since cast aside the religiosity that gave rise to its core civilizational principles. But, unlike Christianity, Islam inherently fuses inward, personal spirituality with outward religious observances. It is focused just as fiercely on the community of believers as it is on the individual believer. For these reasons, the secularism that is sweeping the globe behind the expansion of Western influence causes chaos in the Islamic world. Separating "church and state" erodes the very essence of Muslim life. Allawi rightly points out that for Islamic civilization to simply survive, let alone assume a role as a global contributor, it will have to engage modernity on Islamic terms -- socially, politically, economically. Unthinking adoption of Western political thought and secularization, as well as panicked, reactionary, violent calls to retreat to 7th century practices in the 21st century, will equally doom Islam as a civilization. Instead, Allawi, reasons, Muslims must rediscover the true spiritual nature of Islam and build upon it a new space for a rejuvenated Islam in the modern world.

J says

Not so much about the religion as the civilization that created/was created by the religion. The encroachment of secular modernity, mostly via European colonialism, sucked the religious spirit out of the civilization which largely was what made it so dynamic and vibrant in its golden age. Without the religious basis for society, the arts, philosophy and even governance, the civilization adopted a Western secular veneer that is neither organic nor comfortable for practitioners. Lack of religiosity in the larger civilization is a major factor in the current dissatisfaction which that society is now experiencing.

"...the entire argument as to whether Islam is in conflict with modernity or vice versa is false. The issue is whether Muslims want to create and dwell in a civilizational space which grows out of their own beliefs without disrupting the world of others. This world may be entirely different from that which exists in terms of its structures, demands, values and expectations, or it may be similar to it in parts."

R.Z. says

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand I learned a LOT about the Islamic worldview that was helpful in my understanding of Islam. There was much about the history of Islamic theology and the major players in shaping it. In much of the discussion, the reader could substitute the word Christianity for the word Islam as the two great religions share so many commonalities.

On the other hand, the author has written what becomes by the end of the book a bitter lament of how Islam manifests itself today. Allawi does what so many minority thinkers do: measures his situation by the

situation of the majority. In this case, he measures the Muslim world by the achievements and foibles of the "West" and the modernity it is spreading throughout the world.

Christians would think that Islam should be seen, not as a political entity, but as a religion as does Christianity, but this is not true. Islam sees itself as a totality in its relationship to the Divine where every aspect of existence bows before the one God who created us all. Where Christianity has made its peace with "being in the world but not of the world" and promotes the separation of church and state (in the United States at least), Islam recognizes that all of Creation is of God and must be seen as such.

This is where Allawi really struggles in this book and at times seems to be speaking out of both sides of his mouth, sometimes saying one thing and at other times implying the opposite. So much that claims to be Islamic today has been seduced by the desire for power, for material wealth, or by the belief that violence will bring Islam onto the world stage as a major player among nations. While he attempts to understand how this came about, blaming the West as much as he blames Islam itself, he doesn't hold out much hope for the true Islamic society where all aspects of the individual and society seek to do the will of Allah.

Christianity never had such a dream and instead emphasizes the individual's inner commitment to God with the responsibility to work together to better the situation of people throughout the world, all the while recognizing that no Utopian society can be perfected, but nevertheless must be continually worked toward because that is what God requires of us.

Perhaps these two worldviews are what should be discussed in the many Muslim/Christian Dialogues that are taking place these days. We have so very much to learn from each other. After all, the core message that God has given through his chosen prophets throughout the ages is the same. We know what that is. Now we only have to discover it in each other.

John Gaynard says

Ali A. Allawi successfully argues that Islamic civilization, after just about throwing the baby out with the bathwater, while trying to emulate the industrial achievements of Western European civilization through mimetism, will only be able to find its own way into modernity if it rediscovers its own wellsprings of knowledge.

K C says

Very interesting - made me think

Murtaza says

This book makes a comprehensive argument that the Islamicate world today is a "mortally wounded civilization" that has been devastated by its confrontations over the past two centuries with secular modernity, Western colonial power and its own venal and shortsighted native elites. Allawi himself is a

prominent Iraqi political figure, but the scope of the book encompasses the entire Muslim world rather than focusing on the perspective of the Arabs or any other ethnic group. His perspective is a refreshingly intelligent and heartfelt take on pan-Islamism and almost feels like a dispatch from a more enlightened era. He argues that although many, likely most, Muslims still feel a strong attachment to their religion, the broader scaffolding of Islamic civilization has for the most part disappeared. Islamic economics, science, medicine, architecture, manufacturing, political theory and a variety of other disciplines which were absolutely core to the world of Islam have either been completely lost or only continue to exist as hollowed-out parodies of their former selves.

Historically these fields were all developed with an ultimate intention of bringing people closer to God and fulfilling the Quranic injunction to understand and appreciate the signs of the Divine within the immanent world. Prosperity and well-being were the expected byproducts of practices that were at their core spiritual, intended to cultivate the Divine attributes and help them reflect into creation. Reading about the original spiritual and metaphysical bases of these "secular" fields its striking how little Muslims anywhere in the world today actually know about their religion and what it means. This is despite a widespread attachment to "Team Islam," as well as the thin shroud of religiosity people try and veil over their thoroughly-yet-haphazardly modernized societies and selves. The failure of Muslims indoctrinated in Western economics to even hear the words of a successful renewer like former Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohammed (who proposed a gold-based shared currency for intra-OIC trade), speaks to how deeply alienated most have become from their own tradition.

Allawi is generally not optimistic about the revival of Islamic civilization, though he concedes that in some form the religion will widely continue to exist into the foreseeable future. Having said that, his argument for a possible renewal of the Islamicate world is refreshing. He doesn't argue for remedying the consequences of modernity strictly within the context of that same modernity, as many others, including political Islamists, generally tend to do. While the last two centuries of change have devastated the outer manifestations of Islamic civilization, Allawi argues that the one formidable bulwark against its extinction remains the spiritualized Muslim individual. Generally speaking Muslims have been very resistant to the claim that material advancement must also mean spiritual impoverishment. Their possible rediscovery of the spiritual bases of their faith also offers the hope that they can renew its outer forms, drawing on resources from within. The main obstacle to this is the fact that the traditional social vehicles of Islamic spirituality have largely been destroyed in the 21st century, first by authoritarian secular modernizers and more recently by the Salafi/Wahhabi movement.

As a result many Muslims today know almost nothing about the way that their faith was practiced for most of its history, or even more importantly *why* it was ultimately practiced as such. In contrast to the strictly rational school of modern Western thought, in Islam the experiences of intuition, inspiration and reflection are considered legitimate sources of knowledge. These experiences can attain through religious expression in the Sufi orders and Imami Shiism and have historically been a powerful force - including among the first generation of Muslims who attempted to resist physical colonization by the West (such as Abdelkader Djazairi, Imam Shamil, Omar Mukhtar etc.). Allawi argues that only by returning to the spiritual roots of the tradition can the wellsprings of its renewal be found. I actually this to be a compelling argument for the renewal and rehumanization of the Muslim world, which in many ways today simply feels like an inferior version of secular modernity, albeit wearing Oriental garb.

Reading the book, I was very impressed with Allawi as a thinker. He is clearly a deeply humane and sensitive man who is still very attached to the universalism that Islamic civilization at its best represents. It gives me some hope that people like him still exist in the political life of nations and I would be fascinated to see him return to a prominent role in Iraqi politics, as the news suggests he may in the future. His book is a

refreshing change from parochial ethnic nationalism, mimetic liberalism and hardheaded fundamentalism that often comes across in books with titles about the “crisis of Islam.” My one complaint is that, despite his good writing, the editing of this book was very bad and it ended up being a much denser read than it needed to be as a result of this. Nonetheless I would recommend this to any Muslim concerned about the future of their tradition, as well as non-Muslims seeking to dispel some of the clouds of fear and confusion that hover over the subject of Islam today.

Diane says

The author gives a history of the decline of the Islamic world, particularly vis-a-vis the West, and assesses the current situation. He believes that while Islamic belief and practice remain strong, the larger Islamic culture has atrophied, and Muslims tend to use Western cultural forms to express their commitments.

The book is packed with information about Islamic history and philosophy, and the impact of Islamic mysticism, particularly Sufism, in this history. I would recommend the book for this alone, as the author has a great deal of knowledge, and will introduce you to Islamic thinkers that you likely have never heard of.

On the other hand, the author never clearly defines the components of the Islamic civilization that he seeks to revive. The only concrete idea that he discusses is materialism, to the extent that he laments Muslims' growing materialism at the expense of their faith. However, he never explains how this is different from the materialism of Christians or practitioners of any other faith. He also never explains why the Islamic thinkers who tried to revive Islamic civilization over the past two centuries failed. I think if he were to discuss this, he might give the reader more insight into how the revival that he hopes for might take place.
