

Book Review

Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World by Akbar S. Ahmed. London: I.B.Tauris, 1999, 253 pp. ISBN 1 86064 257 8.

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The resurgence of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies has increased attention and scrutiny by the West of an alleged Islamic threat. For a long period, Islam constituted the demonized “other.” During the cold war era, the Soviet Union had taken over Islam’s traditional role as the threat to the West. In winning the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama thought that the West had achieved a victory for itself and its ideas. In his analysis of the resurgence of Islam, Fukuyama contends that Islam’s days of cultural conquests are over. It may win back some old adherents but it certainly will have no adherents in Germany, Japan and Russia.¹ Fukuyama’s analysis, despite its naivety and simplicity, if accepted, would have perhaps ended Western scholars’ and policy makers’ hunt for the “other” making Islam a threat to the West. Samuel Huntington, however, mocked Fukuyama’s supercilious declaration. He came out with his simple theory of the clash of civilizations. Samuel Huntington took the title for his controversial article “The Clash of Civilizations?” from Bernard Lewis and argues that with the end of the cold war, ideological conflicts will be replaced by wars between nations and groups of different civilizations.² Like Lewis, Huntington believes that this struggle for a New World order is taking place in the long boundary separating the West and Islam. His argument that future conflicts will be between civilizations and not States has once again put history into dialectical motion with Islam pitted against the West.³

Akbar S. Ahmed, in the book under review, asks if the clash of civilizations is inevitable. He concludes that the confrontation is neither necessary nor desirable. There is much in common between Islam and the West that needs to be increasingly explored and explained. Akbar reminds the Muslims to live by the ideal and suggests explaining the

faith in clear, unmistakable terms to be appreciated and respected in the modern world. Akbar could do this because, as he says,

I come to Islam from the conviction that in it I find the best way to grasp the complexity and pain of living in a world with so many religions and races, each insisting on its superiority. Islam gives me security and stability, a sense of identity, a coherent world-view in a world constantly in flux (p. xiv).

To be sure, the Western conception of their faith is totally different from the way Muslims look at their religion. For the West, religion is a system of personal belief; for Muslims, Islam is a way of life. Unlike the modern secular norm, Islam is comprehensive in scope in which religion is integral to politics. To the West, therefore, Islam becomes incomprehensible, and irrational. If one adds Muslim efforts to pursue policies contrary to the dictates of the West or to redress the unfavourable balance of global power, Muslims also become extremists and threatening. The Western media adds fuel to the fire. Their programmes are often slanted to suggest negative images of Muslims. Yet all is not lost. Islam and the West need not clash. They should understand each other and the crucial step in this direction is to explain the “other, the strange, the foreign”. Akbar does a remarkable job in explaining Islam in his *Islam Today*. He presents Islam not as an exotic other, but as a system seriously involved in suggesting a way of living.

Akbar’s explanation of *Islam Today* is not theological. It is not a portrayal of Islamic ideals either. His interest is more in explaining the behaviour of the Muslim world, the way they differ from the West, and in pointing out “where Muslims are able to live by the ideal and where they are not” (p. 5). This, in a sense, is an anthropological study of Islam and the Muslim world with South Asian Muslims, in particular, at the background. “The book is impressionistic—part travelogue, part history” (p. xii). Much of its arguments and some of its chapters are available in Akbar’s earlier works.⁴

Islam, it is explained, is a religion of peace, universalism, brotherhood and the unity of human beings. It emphasizes a balance between this world and the hereafter, the *Dunyā* and the *Dīn*. A good Muslim must balance the world with the principles of the religion. The ideal Muslim is Prophet Muhammad (SAS), the perfect person, *al-Insān al Kāmil*. He abhorred tyranny and hence migrated to Madinah. He taught equality and practiced it. He is not divine though he did receive revelation in the form of the Qur’ān. The Prophet is the messenger, the Qur’ān is the message of Allah (SWT). Muslims understand the

message through the five pillars of Islam: *Shahādah* (testamentary declaration) allows a person to enter Islam. *Ṣalāh* (prayer) helps Muslims to remember Allah (SWT). *Zakāh* (alms or wealth tax) reflects the essential compassion of Islam. *Haj* (pilgrimage) symbolises equality of believers. *Ṣawm* (fasting) teaches the Islamic philosophy of austerity, self-reliance and discipline. The Muslim world, in terms of prayers, values and emotions, reflects unity, their expressions often changes within a different cultural environment. Thus, to speak of many Islams, as done by Western scholars, is inaccurate and misleading.

Islam, as outlined above, did not spread by the sword as argued by Medieval Christian writers and some Orientalists. This may well have been true in some cases and account for some conversions. In general, Akbar explains, Islam spread because of its “breathtaking simplicity”, its emphasis on equality of people, and because it provides a healthy balance between affairs of the world and those of religion (p. 56). Likewise it is wrong to assume, as is done in the West, that Islam is inherently anti-Christian, anti-Jew and anti-Semite. Muslims feel a sense of affinity and continuity with earlier religions. The prophets, many traditions, and the belief in one omnipotent God are common. Jews and Christians are the people of the Book. Their prophets are the prophets of Islam as well. One Christian monk, Bahīrah, spotted Muhammad (SAS) as Prophet. Another Christian, Waraqah, assured the Prophet of seeing Gabriel. Muslims revere Moses as a prophet. The original Muslims, the Arabs, were themselves Semites. Zionism, however, was a foreign import to the Middle East. The creation of Israel and the loss of the holy places in Jerusalem are viewed with a sense of injustice and anger among Muslims.

Akbar Ahmed challenges Western assumptions about Islam. He explores the history of three Muslim empires: the Osmanlis, the Ṣafavīds and the Mughals, the superpowers of their age. He explains the beauty of Muslim civilization, their tolerance towards people of other faith, the stability they provided to the society and their grandeur in architecture, art and science. He points out that some Muslim emperors did indulge in sexual decadence but it is not Islam. Similarly, the discrimination against women that the Taliban of Afghanistan practice is against the spirit of Islam. Likewise the inequality between the rich and the poor in the Muslim world is not Islamic. “It is the asymmetry typical of post-colonialism greed of rampant capitalism. It is the selfish and myopic acquisitiveness of the elite” (p. 147). It is ironic, however,

that these un-Islamic extravagance, vulgarity, and luxury provided the West with its images of Islam. The problem with the West is “many of the prejudices of writers and intellectuals which are rooted in the secular tradition are transferred to Islam... They see Islam as licentious (which it is not); they see it as misogynist (which it is not) and as plagued with a priesthood (there is no priesthood among Sunnis who make up 90% of Muslims)” (pp. 230-31). The Western audio-visual media help perpetuate these images by programmes slanted to suggest negative images of Muslims and Islam.

What is to be done? Akbar suggests that the West should rid itself of the colonial and racial dimensions of its attitudes towards Islam. The Western media should take a more balanced and more understanding position on Islam and resist the temptation to slip into old-style Orientalist prejudices. They should make Muslims more visible in their programmes. Most importantly, the West should address justly the problems, for instance, of the Bosnians and Kosovans in Europe, the Palestinians in the Middle East and Kashmiris in South Asia. On their part, Muslim societies need to recreate the sense of *‘adl*, (justice) and *ihsān*, compassion, to play a major role in the world. Akbar has written with feeling as well as critical concern. It should help bridge the gap between the Muslims and the West.

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
2. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993)3: 22-49
3. Ibid., also Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
4. For similar arguments see Akbar s. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (London: Routledge, 1988) and *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992). Part of chapter of 5 and the whole of chapter 6 appears in his *Living Islam: From Samarkand to Stornoway* (London: BBC Books, 1993).

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