Ali Allawi, *Crisis of Islamic Civilization*.

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Ali Allawi’s book is a masterful analysis of the complex theological, political, social, economic, and cultural features of Islam. The theme of the book is rooted in Islamic orthodoxy. Allawi is an able advocate and a brilliant defender of the causes of Islam. He is dedicated to its authenticity, to its historical evolutions, and to the struggles that the Faith encountered throughout its marches in history.

The book has eleven chapters that can be divided into the historical decline and the requisites for the recovery of Islam. In each of these chapters, the author assembles a wealth of scholarly context to the argument that Islamic civilization in the last century and half experienced persistent assault by “reformers and secularists.” Islamists with different ideological intensity are attempting to restore “the pivotal role of Islam in society” (p. 41).

Their vision is no less than the restoration of the last caliphate that was “folded” in 1924 when the last Ottoman Caliph was deposed. The geographical features of the envisioned caliphate are described as follows:

The geographical space of Islam was by far the widest known to man before the advent of the empire of Europe. It stretched right across the Eurasia land mass and into Africa, forming a distinct religious and cultural community, even though it was divided into different political states (p. 44).

This contiguous “abode of Islam” was fragmented by the abode of the secular, meaning European modernization and “scientism.” The concept of the nation-state had epitomized national unity, but the way nationalism is framed by the secular non-Islamic world is not adequate. The European version of the nation-state is wholly antithetical to that vast theocratic and Quranic caliphate. The spirit of Enlightenment and the intellectual renaissance that have emasculated Christianity have indirectly contributed to the emasculating of Islam also.

The onset of “colonialism”, “modernism”, “secularism”, regional conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Afghanistan and the rise of Wahhabism and Salafism have combined to weaken Islamic civilization. The decline and eventual fall of the Ottoman Empire was the last calamity that had befallen Islam and sealed its decline permanently.

In the waning years of colonialism, Islamic scholars emerged calling for an Islamic revival. The author discusses two influential Islamic scholars, Mohammed Iqbal (1877 – 1938) of Punjab and Said Nursi (1877-1960) of Turkey. Both of these scholars “were deeply concerned with regaining the self-confidence of the Muslim in
the face of huge threats affecting the integrity of Islamic civilization and the commitments of Muslims to the legacies of their past” (p.50). They called for the return of Sharia and the promotion of strict Islam. They entertained a “vision of Islam that preserved the vitality of the faith” (P.58). Iqbal called on the believer to express his faith as an activist and a relentless promoter of Islam.

He instructed by stating that “the individual can only be a realized being if he or she strives for perfection through moral action” (p. 58). “Moral action” in this case is an instructive hint to Allawi’s argument. Reading deeper into the context of this statement, it is easy to see that the author presents Iqbal as having been in favor of a temporized jihad, a strategy where jihad would begin as passive “struggle” to be realized in an open holy war at propitious times. The believer is duty bound to preserve, revitalize and publicize Islam and jihad is a sacramental duty of all believers.

Said Nursi, a Kurd born in Anatolia, lamented the assault of modernism that was already rampant in Europe at the end of 19th century. He too is said to have advocated a gradual return to authentic Islam. Other Islamic scholars from Egypt, Sudan, India, and Indonesia voiced similar views. They called for the rejection of the modernizing trends driven by European culture.

Theologically, Allawi presents Islam as a final word of God communicated to man through Prophet Mohammed’s encounter with the Angel Gabriel. The superiority of Islam to other “civilizations” is consistently repeated. The author attempts to establish that the Quran is immutable, and an inerrant logos of Allah. Allawi’s tone is authoritative, self-assured, and, reading below the surface, literal in the authenticity of the Quran, the Sharia, and the “examples of the prophetic model.”

Islamic society and individual moral conduct have moved away from reliance on the fundamentals of the revelatory experience and the example of the prophetic model. In a number of Muslim countries, a dogmatic scientism has driven the sense of the sacred away from private and public consciousness (p. 18).

The above quote and the author’s broader emphasis throughout the 304 pages argue that Islam as it was first introduced has deviated from its authenticity. It cannot guarantee its viability unless it confronts the overt call for reform of the Faith and reclaims its “first principles” as were written in the Quran.

The rise of the nation-state where citizenship is determined by xenophobic nationalism has prevented Islam from expanding its reach beyond the political borders of the modern nation-state. Political borders symbolize political division; Islam as a universal faith transcends borders.
The *Umma*, the universal and all-encompassing future caliphate state, is prevented from reconstituting itself in the image of its original and prophetic intent by petty dictators, monarchies, tribal war lords and western-minded nationalists whose loyalty to Islam is nominal.

The rise of fundamentalists who get their inspiration from Salafism, such as al Qaeda and other terrorist groups is a desperate reaction to the backslidden leaders in Islamic states and “western secularism”.

The Salafi, Wahhabi, and al Qaeda version of fundamentalism is misguided, counterproductive, and self-defeating. The yearning for a truly Quranic and Sharia-based Islam is a worthy and obligatory goal. Islam needs rehabilitation and restoration to its original version. To reach such a dispensation of resurrected and restored Islam, a broad review of the strategies must be endorsed by Muslims.

Allawi argues that any attempt at reforming Islam will mean surrendering the high moral grounds that Islam enjoys relative to other faiths. What is needed is reorienting Islam to its inner and outer realms of faith.

The inner realm of faith influences the believers’ heart and mind. It makes the individual a faithful follower of Islam dedicated to its revival, vitality, and dynamic spread. While apostasy of Muslims to other faiths is condemned as a capital crime, bringing non-Muslims by poaching on the territories of other faiths, such as Christianity, is an inner manifestation of a good believer.

While immigrating to other lands is prohibited to Muslims, the exception that is provided in the Sharia where Muslims can leave the abode of Islam to other lands for the purpose of spreading Islam is a commendable duty of the believer.

The outer realm is the global world to which Islam was sent to evangelize. In the opinion of the author, cultivating Islam to reach its outer manifestations is a sacramental duty of all Muslims. It is a given Quranic injunction that the world is an abode of Islam. Even territories that are not reached by Islam are potential abodes of Islam.

In the mean time, in so far as Islam has not yet penetrated their realms, they are places where Islam ought to struggle hard to bring converts to the faith. In order to realize this sacred goal, Islam must ward off “secularization” and modernization as well as western inspired global agendas such as the Declaration of Human Rights.

The ultimate purpose of secularization of Islam would be to reduce its domain to the private sphere, as an individual faith, or at the best a community of faith. It might
inform an individual’s actions and decisions, but Islam will not form the basis of any ordering of society or politics. This will bring Islam to the same condition that others, non-established religions have in the modern world. In time, the singularity of Islam will disappear, and with it any possibility of its outer expression having any serious impact on the world at large. Islam would then lose whatever claim it might have to be the incubator of a unique form of a future civilization (p. 255).

Ali Allawi is a masterful advocate for the revitalization and advance of Islam. Like other scholars who view Islamic interests as driven by zero-sum outcomes where Islamic survival is contingent on the diminished role of other faiths or cultures, the author finds himself in logical obfuscations as in the above quote.

Allawi’s scholarship is unassailable if it were not for the fact that he cannot overcome the huge burden associated with the universal purpose of Islam. The “outer expression” of Islam is an agenda to “form the basis of any ordering of society or politics” even if it meant reaching into the “outer” realms of other faiths to enshrine Sharia.

The beclouding associated with attempting to rationalize rigid beliefs is even made worse when the universality of human rights is questioned in Allawi’s logic. Human rights abuses against women, minorities, and other religions are accepted on the terms of Islam’s Sharia laws only. The current United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is a western inspired document which Muslims should not countenance. The rationale for this rejection is that the document stands for the empowerment of individual dignity, individual choice, and citizenship rights, to which the Islamic Umma may not be able to exert its authoritarian hold.

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