

Introduction

The place of Islam within contemporary civilisation is among the foremost issues in international relations today. Islam has a history dating back more than 1400 years and throughout this time Muslims have had constant and extensive relations with other world civilisations, including the West. Islam is a major world religion today with 1.5 billion followers who reside in more than fifty Muslim-majority countries, predominantly in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, millions of Muslims reside across Europe, North America and in other Western countries.

Islamic civilisation was dominant in the pre-modern world since Islam's advent in the seventh century. The decline of Islamic civilisation corresponds with the rise of Western civilisation as the dominant influence on the world. Contemporary civilisation is arguably Western-dominated, significantly shaped by Western norms, values, systems and institutions. Historians have documented the extinction of more than two dozen civilisations by the beginning of the last century and those that remain, including the Far Eastern Chinese, Christian Near East, Christian Russian, Hindu, Japanese, Polynesian, Eskimo, Nomadic and Islamic, are at risk of either annihilation or assimilation by Western civilisation.¹ It is within this context of contemporary 'Western' civilisation that a modern, resurgent Islam is a new phenomenon that both experiences and constitutes significant challenges.

This book is written primarily for the Western reader, both Muslims and those not of the Islamic faith. For those who have come to know of Islam from a Western context, it is often the case that what is known is more about what Islam *is not* rather than what it *is*. For about 80 per cent of people in the West, information about Islam primarily comes from the mass media. The images of Islam presented in the Western media are most often a version of Islam that has little correspondence with the essential teachings of Islam and the diversity of geographies, histories, cultures and experiences that comprise the lives of Muslims across the globe. This is not to suggest that the violence, subjugation of women and general intolerance that have come to be associated with Islam are not a reality, that this is an invention of the Western media. Indeed, violence, violations of human rights and intolerance are facts of the Muslim world, but they are relative to a minority of Muslims and are indicative of the mass media's tendency to focus on the stereotypical, unusual and sensational. Another salient point here is that the Muslims who have made Islam infamous for violence, intolerance, human rights violations and the like have lost sight of the essence of the faith.

That said, religion is what its followers make it and there are various approaches to and interpretations of Islam among Muslims. The views of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban differ significantly from those of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose views differ from those of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP). On another plane, Muslims describe themselves as Sunni or Shiites, liberals or conservatives, traditionalists or modernists, Salafis or Sufis, Hanafis or Shafis—or indeed any combination of these, among other groupings. However, the members of these different groups all identify themselves as Muslims and define the faith they profess as Islam. In the name of Islam, Muslims may engage in terrorism or be champions of non-violence, advocate human rights or violate them, believe in gender equality or the subservience of women to men, support democracy or declare it un-Islamic. This diversity of approaches is indicative of the multitude of ideas that comprise Islamic thought today.

There is consensus among all Muslims, however, that the Quran is the primary source of Islam. This has been the common standard repeated by Islamic reformers of various ideological approaches across the ages. From Ibn Taymiyyah and Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi in the fourteenth century to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the

eighteenth century to Muhammad Abduh in the nineteenth century to Fazlur Rahman in the twentieth century to contemporary Islamic scholars such as Mohammad Hashim Kamali and Tariq Ramadan, the Quran has been upheld as the central text on which Islamic thought must be based. Muslim groups of all labels must ultimately justify their beliefs and practices on the basis of the Quran. The fundamental differences among the various Muslim groups are, therefore, a matter of different interpretations of the Quran. Changing the status quo of Islamic thought requires an appropriate methodology of interpreting the Quran. The catalyst for reform, however, must begin in the realm of ideas.

This book is centrally focused on the power of ideas as agents for social and global change. There is a vast literature documenting the impact of ideas on societies and how different ideas have shaped the world. For instance, RC Sproul's *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World* describes the continuing influence that the ideas of great Western philosophers from antiquity until modernity have had on current social systems and institutions. Taking a sharper focus on modernity, Michael Mandelbaum's *The Ideas that Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-first Century* describes the dominance of the ideas of liberalism propagated by former US President Woodrow Wilson in the aftermath of World War II—free-market capitalism, constitutional limitations of democracy and peace instead of war as the normal basis of international relations—that largely define contemporary civilisation.

More extensive and comprehensive works on the impact of ideas include Peter Watson's *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud*, Stuart Hirschberg's *Past to Present: Ideas that Changed Our World* and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's *Ideas that Changed the World*, which tell the story of human history on the basis of ideas and inventions and how they have continued to shape all aspects of life. Watson explains the rise and fall of civilisations not only in terms of the presence and absence of certain ideas, but also the role of countervailing ideas in this process:

Throughout history certain countries and civilisations have glittered for a while, then for one reason or another been eclipsed ... the Chinese civilisation, which developed

paper, gunpowder, woodblock printing, porcelain and the idea of the competitive writing examination for public servants, and led the world intellectually for many centuries, never developed mature science or modern business methods—capitalism—and therefore, after the Middle Ages, allowed itself to be overtaken by the West ... The same might be said about Islam. Baghdad in the ninth century led the Mediterranean world intellectually: it was here that the great classics of ancient civilisations were translated, where the hospital was conceived, where *al-jabr*, or algebra, was developed ... By the eleventh century, thanks to the rigours of fundamentalism, it had disappeared.²

Many Muslims would fail to acknowledge the influence of ideas in defining and shaping Islam. Many would argue that Islam is resistant to the influence of human ideas due to the primacy of its divine source, the Quran, supplemented by the Prophetic traditions. Moreover, in the minds of many Muslims, the idea that the will of God is the determinant of events, developments and various phenomena tends to overshadow explanations based on empirical factors or the laws of social and natural sciences. However, the idea that social and natural laws are also the creation of God is consistent with Islamic teachings and if this way of thinking became normative again among Muslims, it would mark the return of reason and rationality in Islamic thought. Such thinking would facilitate a more appropriate balance between faith and reason in Islam, which would have positive consequences for resolving the various debates and dilemmas discussed in this book.

Presently, the default position of many Muslims is that Islam, as they understand and practise it, has a direct line to God as conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad without any significant human intervention. This book, however, shows that throughout Islamic history until today, there has never been uniformity of interpretations among Muslims about even some fundamental questions in Islam. Sacred texts like the Quran and the Bible are open to multiple interpretations. How a faith is defined, understood and practised—particularly in terms of its socio-political dimensions—is largely determined by external contexts: social, economic and political, rather than the divine. Diversity of interpretations and ideas has been a constant

feature of Islamic history and has continued to shape Muslim thinking, cultures and societies, as well as their understanding and practice of Islam at the socio-political level.

The perception of Islam today raises important questions in terms of how Muslims understand and practise their faith. Most significantly, the challenge for Muslims is to re-examine their conception of Islam in the context of contemporary civilisation; to reconsider priorities; to develop an agreeable methodology for interpretation; and to recapture the essence of Islam as a faith principally concerned with fulfilling the will of God through social justice, human dignity and the overall well-being of humanity. Finally, the challenge for Islam, a religion shaped by ideas of the pre-modern world, is to find a place within contemporary civilisation where it can maintain its integrity and identity, realise its higher objectives and also co-exist harmoniously with the rest of humanity on the basis of mutual respect and prosperity.

A meaningful reconciliation between Islam and the major challenges of contemporary civilisation are a matter of how Islam is conceptualised and defined by Muslims. Essentially, this is a question of how sacred texts are interpreted. The overriding values and principles of Islam are consistent with those of other faiths and the humanitarian goals of Western civilisation. A literalist reading of the Quran in the context of pre-modern norms, however, will not lead to this perspective. The Quran must be read holistically on the basis of the historical, social and political context of all its verses concerning a particular issue. This approach is known as contextualisation.

The Quran must also be read with a view to identify the higher objectives, or *maqasid*. The goals, purpose and intentions behind particular commands, permissions and prohibitions in the Quran are frequently stated in the book but might not be obvious from any particular verse. Rather, a reading of multiple verses concerning a particular topic generally results in the identification of the *maqasid*. Once the *maqasid* of an issue are identified, all verses concerning that issue should be read in terms of these objectives and not in a way that undermines or violates them. Moreover, the *maqasid* approach emphasises that interpretation of the Quran should tend towards compassion and mercy rather than harshness and punishment. The concepts of mercy and compassion are central to the preamble with which the chapters of the Quran begin. The *maqasid*

approach avoids the problems associated with literal interpretations and ensures that the spirit of the text is maintained. Combined, contextualisation and the *maqasid* approaches form an Islamically legitimate methodology for interpreting the Quran.

This book deals with the most complex issues facing Islam today, including those concerning Islamic law, human rights, democracy, jihad, the Israel–Palestine conflict and relations with the West. In approaching these issues, *Islam and Contemporary Civilisation* seeks to find a resolution on the basis of the Quran, interpreted through a contemporary methodology involving a contextualised reading of the text in terms of its higher objectives. I term this approach the contextual-*maqasid* methodology. This methodology maintains the integrity and relevance of Islam based on the Quran as the primary source, while allowing the faith to respond constructively to the challenges and realities of modernity addressed in this book.

Islam and Contemporary Civilisation is divided into three parts: Foundations, Debates and Dilemmas. The first part, Foundations, introduces the reader to the necessary foundations for understanding Islam, the field of Islamic studies, and the debates and dilemmas covered in this book. Chapter 1 provides a detailed discussion of Islam as a religion and the salient features of the faith from the orthodox perspective. It allows the reader to understand the basics of Islamic beliefs and practices in a context removed from the political complexities that often distract from understanding the essence of Islam. Chapter 2 gives a comprehensive overview of Islamic history with a focus on various movements and developments, highlighting the diversity of ideas that has shaped Islam over time. This chapter shows that what many might assume to be a given in Islam or a self-evident aspect of the religion is actually the product of certain ideas of Muslims in particular historical, social and political contexts. Chapter 3 discusses the evolution of Islamic thought in modern times, particularly those concerning the challenges of modernity and relations with the West. This chapter examines the ideas of some of the leading Muslim intellectuals in modern times and how external factors shaped their approaches to Islam.

The second part of this book, Debates, addresses three issues that have dominated both Western and Muslim thought about Islam: Islamic law, human rights and democracy. Chapter 4 examines the sources, evolution and implementation of Islamic law and presents a

more detailed explanation of the contextual-*maqasid* methodology for interpretation that I advocate in this book. In chapters 5 and 6 the competing arguments concerning human rights and democracy respectively are laid out and the contextual-*maqasid* methodology is utilised towards a prospective resolution. Chapter 5 demonstrates that Islam is consistent with the International Bill of Human Rights, while chapter 6 confirms the compatibility of Islam and democracy and outlines a model for an Islamic democracy.

The third part of this book, Dilemmas, focuses on the enduring challenges of Islam in the context of modernity, namely the role of the mass media, jihad and Muslim militancy, the question of Palestine, and Islam–West relations. Chapter 7 discusses the power and potential of the mass media not only to define Islam for Western audiences but as a central agent in the democratisation process in Muslim countries. This chapter draws on the fields of media studies, political science and Islamic studies to present an Islamic media model to contribute to this process. Chapter 8 deals with the highly contentious issue of jihad, tracing its evolution throughout Islamic history until today, and offers prospects for a reformulation to support Islam's higher objectives in a way that does not negate the rights of others. It also examines the compatibility of the Islamic laws of war and peace with contemporary international humanitarian law and draws on the contextual-*maqasid* methodology as the basis of a contemporary Islamic theory of international relations. Chapter 9 examines the Israel–Palestine conflict, highlighting the failure of the traditional Islamic conception of the issue as well as the flaws of the peace process. A just resolution of the conflict based on international law and human rights is presented along with an argument for the Islamic legitimacy of this approach. Chapter 10 deals with Islam–West relations in terms of the concerns and interests of both. It discusses the relationship on the basis of US foreign policy as well as poll data on attitudes and opinions from across the Muslim world and the West concerning the other. The concluding chapter summarises the salient findings of this book and considers prospects for the future.

Notes

- 1 Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IV, New York University Press, New York, 1939, pp. 1–2.
- 2 Peter Watson, *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2005, p. 2.