The other primary weakness of the book is the author’s microscopic knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that affect any human behaviour, especially when it is not related to one’s faith. Blaming Muslims above behavioural weaknesses that are commonplace among all nations can hardly be looked upon as good scholarship. Oppression, economic exploitation, injustice, and cultural heritage, among many other factors, all impact a society’s development, its worldview and reactions to events. In addition, the author’s deification of Western culture, politics and value system reflect his considerable ignorance of the West’s own political history, which did in the past and still supports today, some of the most violent, cruel and brutal behaviour that the world has ever experienced, not only threatening the Muslim and the developing world, but also the entire humanity, including the West’s own existence. Adapting the words of the renowned author Phyllis Bennis’ assessment of the American publics’ knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we can safely state that Robert Spencer knows quite a lot about Islam. However, what he knows is completely incomplete.

Dany Doueiri


Few professors possess the credentials of Akbar Ahmed when it comes to discussing contemporary Islam. An anthropologist by training, he has served as Pakistan’s ambassador to the UK, has sat with kings and presidents, and now holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University. He has delivered countless speeches, authored several books, journal and newspaper articles. Perhaps the most telling indication of the authority he commands can be seen in the fact that he has addressed ISNA, North America’s largest Islamic body, as well as the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL), two entities that have diametrically opposed views, and both have hailed him as an exemplar of integrity. Yet, for all of these qualities, I approached his latest book with some cynicism, for Professor Tamara Sonn’s comment, printed on the book’s front cover: “This is the most important
Many of the ideas in the book, its author tells us, have been developed from lectures and journal articles. The first page lets us see the reason for the book’s provocative title: Muslims everywhere in the post 9/11 world feel that they are perceived as terrorists: to them, Islam is under siege. The author tells us that by using the approach of reflexive anthropology, his objective is to explain what is going wrong in the Muslim world, why it is going wrong, and how we can all work towards establishing global stability.

Ahmed does not disappoint. The seven chapters of his book reveal sources that are as diverse as they are compelling; he quotes frequently from the Qur’an and Hadith, and then jumps effortlessly into discussion on Ibn Khaldun and Durkheim. From the classics of Rudyard Kipling to the hate literature of Jimmy Swaggart and Franklin Graham and the hare-brained theories of Samuel Huntington, Ahmed lets us know he is every inch the consummate man-of-the-world cum well-read scholar. He is no self-pitying apologist, and accuses Muslims of using the Qur’an selectively (p. 11), confusing culture and scripture. He notes that the scholars of the Muslims are in disarray, becoming gutless toadies to the despotic leaders of Muslim countries, fleeing towards Western countries for freedom. And yet, in many Muslim countries, the popular thing to do is blame the West (p. 91).

Ahmed utters a truth that may come to many Americans as a surprise, but one that is known to every Muslim, every follower of world affairs: that America, because of its policies, was hated long before September 11. And he makes a bold prediction, one that rings unassailably true: this century will be the century of Islam (p. 7). This is because the deep-rooted prejudices in the West, the crises in the Muslim world have set Islam on a headlong collision course with the major world religions, and this century will decide the outcome.

Like Edward Said’s Orientalism and Covering Islam, and Carl Ernst’s Following Muhammad, he faults scholars for making this artificial, misleading divide between East and West, noting that there are more than 25 million Muslims in the west (p. 17). Yet however, he uses the terms to reflect the two clashing philosophies. This is not the only concept that he faults. With first hand knowledge, he blasts the overwhelmingly popular theory that the Taliban were somehow practicing a puritan view of Islam. Rather, he asserts,
their policy was driven by Pukhtunwali, the harsh social code of the tribe to which the Taliban strongmen belonged, and which has been incorporated into their warped interpretation of Islam (pp. 141 ff.). With dire foreboding, Ahmed tells us that the Taliban have not been destroyed—many people identify with them because of their anti-western stance, and so they have great support in Pakistani communities—as the 2002 elections there evidenced (p. 143).

The situation in the Muslim world, as Ahmed sees it, can be understood in light of Ibn Khaldun’s doctrine of ‘asabiyyah, the concept rooted in tribal and social cohesion. While this idea is contrary to the universalism of the Qur’an, it nonetheless, in normal circumstances, provides stability and continuity. But ‘asabiyyah and its values are breaking down in Muslim societies because of several factors, among them urbanization, large scale migrations to the west, corruption, the crisis of identity, and imported ideas from the West that challenge traditional values and customs (p. 81). This problem is exacerbated by a lethal combination in most Muslim countries: youth, illiteracy and massive unemployment, factors that fuel mobilization for radical change. The reaction can be described as a mutated, exaggerated version of ‘asabiyyah which Ahmed terms as “hyber-asabiyya” (p. 82) — a morbid phenomenon that has manifested itself in other groups as well, such as Muslim clerics in Iran, Jewish settlers on the West Bank, Serb militias in the Balkans, and Hindu groups in India (p. 83). Based on this observation, Ahmed coins another phrase to describe the post-September 11 world: “the post-honor world”. To preserve skewed views of honor, parties have resorted to dishonorable actions, violence in its basest form, including rape (p. 57).

What is the solution? The answer comes as no surprise; there must be dialogue and understanding. Ahmed structures his answer under two rubrics: What Muslims must do, and what the west needs to do. Muslims must accept democracy, seek education and focus on the compassionate dimension of Islam. They need to go beyond the ritualistic practices and examine the true message of their religion with its focus on tolerance. According to Ahmed, none of these needs are unknown to the Muslims. But Ahmed makes a requirement that, while to the European or American reader may be logical, may seem totally unacceptable to many Muslims. He asks that, among other things, Muslims “put themselves in the place of those who see them as a threatening and anarchic force; of Jews in Israel surrounded by millions of Arabs united in their aim of the destruction of their state . . . ” The sad fact of the matter is that although the Qur’an has verses that force its readers to come to this reality (Qur’an 5: 21, 17: 104), the majority of the Muslims have adopted an intractable position on the issue of Israel, one that is used by many
of the leaders and preachers in the Muslim countries to divert the attention of their subjects from internal problems.

For the West: it must depart from its triumphant, condescending approach to every Arab and Muslim nation. In agreement with his colleague, Associate Professor and former Ambassador Clovis Maksoud, Ahmed suggests that the West talk with the Arabs and Muslims instead of talking to them, and make some effort to genuinely understand Islam. The bottom line then is that education harbours a solution: the madrasah curriculum must change, and the Western Islamophobia must disappear.

Ahmed writes with passion, sincerity and integrity. He does not show any fear to tread where the less courageous may seek to conceal one’s positions. In describing Bush’s much-publicized Freudian slip in his use of “crusade” to describe the war on terrorism, Ahmed bluntly states that the US President, in this crusader mode, has rolled back the post-modern age back a thousand years with its intent on war and rearranging the map of the Middle East. I cannot think of any writer who has summed up the situation so aptly.

Ahmed’s book is an immense contribution to understanding a contemporary, dangerous world. No course on contemporary Islam or global studies should be deemed complete without this work. Both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds owe Ahmed a great debt for this piece of honest, hard-hitting scholarship. Every imām in Western mosques would benefit greatly from reading this book and taking his advice seriously. For my cynical pre-evaluation of the work, I must conclude that I owe Professor Sonn an apology: Ahmed’s book is evidence that she does not lie.

Khaleel Mohammed


As a highly welcome offshoot of the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978),¹ Western literary Orientalism has emerged since 1980s as an independent sub-field of English studies. Central to this field is the

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