

A different civilisation

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Amir Taheri reviews Islamic Imperialism: A History by Efraim Karsh.

Anyone interested in the debate about the place of Islam in the modern world should read this book. The reason is that Efraim Karsh, a professor of Mediterranean Studies at King's College, London, does not fall into either of the camps that dominate the debate.

One camp, let's call them apologists, represents Islam as a religion of peace that created a great civilisation that was later weakened, and subjugated by Western Imperialism. Presented as a mea culpa, this narrative is, in fact, marked by contempt for Muslims who are presented solely as victims and mere objects in their own history.

The second camp, which could be called Islamophobic, portrays Islam as a manual for terror, and presents its history as a chronicle of plunder, destruction and death. In this narrative Islam is the foe not only of civilisation but of mankind.

Karsh offers a new approach. He rejects the condescending approach of the apologists and the hateful passion of the Islamophobes. Instead he presents Islam as a rival for Western civilisation in what is, after all, a contest for shaping the future of mankind. Karsh does not hide whose side he is on in this contest. Muslim readers would respect him because, while he designates Islam as an adversary, he respects them. Being disliked for the right reasons is better than being liked for the wrong ones.

Using Western and Islamic sources, Karsh demolishes the position of the apologists by showing that the misfortunes that befell Muslims

were mostly of their own doing. He argues that the achievements of the so-called 'Golden Age' of Islam have been exaggerated thus making a proper appreciation of Islam's contribution to civilisation, which he admits was significant, that much more difficult.

Karsh offers a fresh look at the Crusades which, incidentally, were seldom seen by Muslims as religious wars but as aggressive forays by the Franks. Focusing on the last 250 years, that is to say since the first modern encounter between the West and Islam, Karsh demonstrates that the Western powers were almost always taken by surprise in the Muslim east.

Contrary to the apologists' claim, the Western democracies did not wish to dismantle the Ottoman Empire and did much to keep it alive as long as possible to counterbalance Tsarist Russia. And, once the Ottomans had self-destructed, Western democracies, led by Britain, reshaped the region more in response to Arab demands at the time rather than any sinister 'Imperialist plot'. While the conventional view is that Hussain, the Sharif of Mecca, and his sons were tools of British Imperialism, Karsh shows that it was, in fact, they who manipulated British power to win several Arab crowns for themselves.

Karsh is less convincing when he moves from history to theological and/or philosophical issues. For example, he speaks of 'Islam's wholesale incorporation of Hellenistic culture and science', something that did not happen, and sees it as the genesis of Islamic politics and jurisprudence. He also states that Islam was attractive to people it conquered because in it 'ethnic and tribal origins counted for nothing'. But three of the Prophet's immediate successors were his fathers-in-law while the fourth was his son-in-law. The Umayyad Caliphate, the first Islamic empire, was dominated by the Quraish while the Abbasids claimed descent from the Prophet's uncle, and the Fatimids, who ruled Egypt, from the Prophet's daughter. Karsh's assertion that Islam replaced absolutist rule by pluralism is also debatable.

What does Islam want? Karsh poses the question and answers it unambiguously: it wants to reshape the world after its own fashion just as Christianity did in its heyday. The message is clear: the world would do well to take Islam's ambitions seriously.

