

The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith and Reason, 1798 to Modern Times

Christopher de Bellaigue

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De Bellaigue's assured and well-researched historical narrative explodes the persistent myth that Islam is essentially conservative, primitive, obscurantist, and intolerant (and the myth's bigoted corollary that ISIS and al-Qaeda somehow represent true Islam).

During Islam's so-called Golden Age from, roughly, the eighth through the twelfth centuries, Muslim doctors, engineers, artists, and scholars made unrivaled contributions to science, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, law, letters, and education (one might think Islam had its own Renaissance centuries before Europe had its Renaissance). Later Christian thinkers, including those who most significantly affected the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, would borrow heavily from these thinkers. It is no exaggeration to say that without Islam's Golden Age there would have been no scientific revolution in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

But as the Christian West was rising, the Islamic world was simultaneously declining. By the end of the eighteenth century, Muslim-majority countries were sadly ripe for conquest and exploitation by the considerably more advanced European countries, symbolized by Napoleon's modern army's easy invasion of a very backward Egypt in 1798.

By almost any metric, Muslim nations had fallen far behind Europe. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Muslim nations had literacy rates of about 3 percent (mostly men), while in Amsterdam 85 percent of men and 64 percent of women were literate. Illiteracy was less of a problem than one might think since Muslim nations had no printing presses (and thus few books or magazines or newspapers). During the Ottoman Empire, printing was a capital crime. There was likewise little interest in renouncing slavery or advancing the status of women. When Napoleon invaded Egypt he faced battalions of spear-throwing slaves who proved to be no match for his highly trained soldiers armed with rifles. In short, structures were in place that resisted Enlightenment values such as liberty, tolerance, equality, constitutional republics, and the separation of "church" and state; little wonder, then, that Europe was considerably more advanced than Muslim nations.

Napoleon's victory was a wake-up call for Muslim thinkers and leaders in Cairo, Istanbul, and Tehran (the cities de Bellaigue focuses on). Muslims' cherished belief that Islam was at the spiritual, intellectual, and social center of the world was imperiled. However, the end of the nineteenth century would, in response to and with the aid of Europe, see a dramatic rise in Islamic modernization.

To be sure, most of these thinkers and leaders were outliers, with some ostracized, some persecuted, some killed, and some just plain ignored. Yet reforms in technology, agriculture, literacy, and liberty occurred in a relatively short period of time, again, often with great resistance and sometimes due to outside (European) pressures.

If Napoleon's invasion symbolizes Islam's decline, the modernizing efforts of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Ottoman sultan's viceroy in Egypt for nearly a half century, best

symbolizes Islam's enlightenment. Muhammad Ali, the "founder of modern Egypt," ensured that Cairo would be the center of reform in the Islamic world. After Napoleon and his armies departed in 1800, Muhammad Ali knew he would need to construct a more European state to withstand future subjugation. He began training and equipping a modern military, whose first major success was squelching a Wahhabi uprising in Arabia. (Note well: for those who think ultraconservative and violent Wahhabism *is* true Islam, such movements were resisted with force throughout the Islamic world. We can trace the rise of contemporary Wahhabist and Salafist Islam to responses to colonialism, on the one hand, and to US collusion with Saudi Arabia—whose clerics freely exported violent Wahhabism throughout the world—on the other. For the sake of cheap gas, the United States turned a blind eye to the export of violent extremism.)

Muhammad Ali disempowered and disenfranchised the clerics who, previously, had a stranglehold on power and thought. He built canals that brought millions of acres under cultivation. He constructed telegraph lines, factories, better roads, and he improved public health and education. He sent forty-three young and eager men on a mission to learn in and from France, with the aim of their returning to Egypt to improve government and administration. In less than fifty years, he transformed Egypt from a medieval society to one on the cusp of a modern society. But in a foretaste of the colonialism to come, although Egypt built the Suez Canal, the United Kingdom seized its control.

We find similar but less-successful stories of reform in Istanbul and Tehran. There were reformers, for sure, but reform in those parts was less sure. Again, incipient colonialism hindered local control and power. As one example, Russia and the United Kingdom exercised veto power over any infrastructure project with which Iran could gain a strategic advantage; they allowed just one train track in the entire country, which connected Tehran with a shrine just outside the city. Think of the tremendous economic and military advantages trains brought to the United States in the nineteenth century.

Of course, trains, cotton, and steam engines are one thing and equality and liberty entirely another. While we may (in fact, do) look down on the Muslim world for its backwardness, it is worth recalling that in the West it took centuries to realize Enlightenment values. In the United States, for example, it took a bitter civil war, which cost more than a million lives, to eradicate slavery (decades after slavery was banned in Europe). Blacks were not granted equal rights until 1964. Women got the right to vote only in 1920. So I see in these astonishingly enlightened Muslim thinkers reason for hope. I believe we will see what we saw in the West: after much pain and struggle, the advance of liberty, tolerance, equality, and the separation of Islam and state in the Muslim-majority world.

Let me offer one small criticism of de Bellaigue. The secularist Enlightenment myth holds that during the "Age of Reason," Diderot, Locke, and Kant invented from pure reason alone human rights and human equality *ex nihilo*. But every idea has a history, and we can find histories of, say, rights and equality in medieval Catholic thinkers, the church fathers, the New Testament, and as far back as the Hebrew Bible. De Bellaigue occasionally sips from the secularist cup, sometimes asserting that only the West and secular values are informing the reform, all the while ignoring support for those values

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within the Islamic tradition. Much work has been done by our Muslim brothers and sisters on Islamic support for tolerance, liberty, and respect for women. I suspect that as Islamic nations evolve, those values will grow and spread.

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