



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

Christopher De Bellaigue

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With majestic prose, Christopher de Bellaigue presents an absorbing account of the political and social reformations that transformed the lands of Islam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Flying in the face of everything we thought we knew, *The Islamic Enlightenment* becomes an astonishing and revelatory history that offers a game-changing assessment of the Middle East since the Napoleonic Wars.

Beginning his account in 1798, de Bellaigue demonstrates how Middle Eastern heartlands have long welcomed modern ideals and practices, including the adoption of modern medicine, the emergence of women from seclusion, and the development of democracy. With trenchant political and historical insight, de Bellaigue further shows how the violence of an infinitesimally small minority is in fact the tragic blowback from these modernizing processes.

Structuring his groundbreaking history around Istanbul, Cairo, and Tehran, the three main loci of Islamic culture, de Bellaigue directly challenges ossified perceptions of a supposedly benighted Muslim world through the forgotten, and inspiring, stories of philosophers, anti-clerics, journalists, and feminists who opened up their societies to political and intellectual emancipation. His sweeping and vivid account includes remarkable men and women from across the Muslim world, including Ibrahim Sinasi, who brought newspapers to Istanbul; Mirza Saleh Shirzi, whose Persian memoirs describe how the Turkish harems were finally shuttered; and Qurrat al-Ayn, an Iranian noble woman, who defied her husband to become a charismatic prophet.

What makes *The Islamic Enlightenment* particularly germane is that non-Muslim pundits in the post-9/11 era have repeatedly called for Islam to subject itself to the transformations that the West has already achieved since the Enlightenment—the absurd implication being that if Muslims do not stop reading or following the tenets of the Qur'an and other holy books, they will never emerge from a benighted state of backwardness. *The Islamic Enlightenment*, with its revolutionary argument, completely refutes this view and, in the process, reveals the folly of Westerners demanding modernity from those whose lives are already drenched in it.

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

Date : Published April 4th 2017 by Liveright

ISBN : 9780871403735

Author : Christopher De Bellaigue

Format : Hardcover 432 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Religion, Islam, World History



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From Reader Review The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith and Reason, 1798 to Modern Times for online ebook

Aditya Raj says

The Islamic Enlightenment by Christopher De Bellaigue is an intriguing account of the progress of the modernisation process in Istanbul, Tehran, and Cairo that took place during the 19th and 20th century. The Napoleon's annexation of Egypt catalysed the modern reforms in Cairo where people were astonished by the esoteric knowledge the invading army and their savants possessed. In Istanbul, the Russians left their mark after defeating the former in the Balkan region and the Ottoman Sultan had to meditate on the debilitated condition of its army and the bureaucracy. In Tehran, the prying eyes of the Ottoman Empire and Russia compelled the Shah to seek help from Britain and France. All these events initiated the modernisation of the Middle-East as the region realized the importance of such reforms and the liberal thoughts started pouring in, thanks to the Middle-Eastern scholars making strides to Europe. To the chagrin of orthodox clerical establishment, the reforms introduced by the rulers and advocated by the proponents jeopardised the old Islamic values and cultures and moreover, they posed an inherent threat to Islam and so were opposed from time to time. Modernisation was not to be achieved in a short period and hence the process continued for two centuries with reforms being made and opposed and then revived again, eventually paving the way for constitutionalism and demand for nation-states. Some rulers zealously endeavoured to bring about reforms and others just acquiesced to the interests of the imperial powers or to their own thriving.

The author has an ingenious perspective of analyzing the incidents and the views advocated by many proponents who spoke against or in the favour of this bulwark of modern reforms and innovations are discussed persuasively. From the Ottomans and Persians revelling at these Western reforms to their denunciations by the religious orders; the author has touched upon all these aspects without any significant prejudices subject to few exceptions. A must read for those interested in the Middle-Eastern history.

David Hill says

How did we get to this point in history, where we face "radical Islamic terrorism" in the West, where Iran is the only modern theocracy, and where Wahhabist Saudi Arabia exports extreme conservative Islamic thought to its neighbors?

De Bellaigue attempts to explain. He begins with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 and concentrates on Cairo, Istanbul, and Tehran. He doesn't attempt to explain any of the theological differences between the various Islamic groups. Instead, he focuses on the characters who have made an impact on Muslim thought. I liked the emphasis on these people; I enjoy the numerous little biographies and find them an easier path to understanding than an emphasis on the beliefs and ideas themselves. As a neophyte to the subject, I recognized few of the names and knew none of this history.

I think this was probably a good introduction to the topics covered, but I don't have any basis of comparison.

Tariq Mahmood says

'Try and pray regularly for forty days, and see whether you can give up prayer afterward', different from 'give

up praying for forty days and see whether you can ever resume the practice afterward?'. Jamal Al-Din Afghani, the founder of pan islamism.

The book demonstrates that Muslim countries have adopted and still desire enlightenment even when some of them are governed by Islamic movements. Turkey, Iran and Egypt are profiled before WW1 to the present.

If Islam engaged so successfully with modernity until the First World War, why since then has reactionary revivalism been able to impose itself on ever larger swathes of the Muslim world?

The rise of Islamism is a blowback from the Islamic Enlightenment – a facet, however detestable, of modernity itself.

Although Muslims were not the authors of the achievements that we now associate with the Enlightenment. No Istanbul blacksmith discovered movable type. No Muslim Voltaire sniped at the clerics by the Nile. But there is a great difference between accepting that Muslim civilization did not initiate the Enlightenment and saying that it did not accept its findings or eat of its fruit. This is a big claim to make. It means that Muslims are either congenitally barred or – even worse – have deliberately cut themselves off from experiences that many consider being universal. It means that the lands of Islam have remained aloof from science, democracy and the principle of equality. It is a claim that is often heard in today's divided, rebarbative, edgy world, and it is nonsense.

'A very solid case for rise of resentment against their colonisers was inevitable and perfectly natural. If the West can today justify the rise of Far right due to uncontrolled immigration especially from the Middle East than the rise of Wahabism needs no explanation. The other impact was in countries like turkey and Iran who although never got colonised but were left with the perennial fear of takeover, which is still evident in their political psyche even today. So basically the organic like enlightenment movements were transformed into facist like militant movements which believed in hard lined nationalist policy back by military might, turkey of today is a classic example.

The issue with rise of political islamisation is two fold, at one level Muslims have to be better than others at moral and virtue if others are far more advanced at science and technology, and other is the huge weight of expectation which every Muslim has to carry around which does not let him effectively compete with the others in science, technology, entertainment etc....

Patrick Elsey says

If you know anything about modern historical writing you know this is bigoted garbage

Hadrian says

Study of three centers of society and education in what are now called 'The Middle East' and how they came to terms with the European Enlightenment in the 19th century. He takes a tour through Cairo, Istanbul, and Tehran, complete with short biographical portraits of writers, political leaders, religious figures, and social activists. De Bellaigue notes how the region was not as backward and passive as is the frequent stereotype, but in fact observed and made specific adaptations in all manner of reforms, ranging from scientific

observation, block printing and public health to army modernization.

These reforms were not uniformly successful - they were beset by internal reactionaries and the preying hands of great power politics - the author goes on to describe a 'counter-Enlightenment', and places it squarely at the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, and further weakened by the tenuous relationship between autocratic rulers and sweeping social reform they may unleash.

Murtaza says

An interesting recreation of Islam's modernization over the past few centuries, focused specifically on three major sites of change in Iran, Turkey and Egypt. This is a standard intellectual history, and charts the lives of most of the well-known Islamic thinkers of this period (Afghani, Abduh, Kemal, Tahtawi, Ale Ahmad etc.), while also recounting the works of a few other lesser-known writers and activists. De Bellaigue's basic contention is that Islam as we know it today has been radically and irrevocably shaped by the forces of modernity. Even ferociously "anti-modern" approaches to religion are colored by their interaction with the thing they are rejecting. Islamism is not a rejection of modernity as much as an articulation of a different way of being modern, one that attempts to take inspiration and guidance from the past. Like quantum physics once something is being observed its own behaviors necessarily change, and Islam's interplay with Enlightenment ideas once it encountered them is no different.

Although the writing in this book is often quite inspired and there were many small anecdotes, quotes, and even a few narratives I was unaware of (particularly in Iran), for the most part the information here will be familiar to most students of modern Islamic history. The best parts were those that went deeper into history, including the reflections penned by Iranian students on their first trips to the West, the perspectives of women on the new opportunities in society, and the creation of "public opinion" through the mass press. It is also striking how positively that the West and its achievements were viewed in the Muslim world in the past, before the actions of colonial governments began to embitter perceptions. Its hard to imagine an Islamic cleric like Mohammed Abduh today, a man who felt perfectly comfortable being both an ardent Europhile and an "Islamist" and who saw no real contradiction between these two positions.

The book seems to have been intended as a rebuttal to the asinine claim made by some pop intellectuals that Islam is not modern and needs to be confronted by modern ideas. It generally accomplishes this, and is thus worthwhile for people seeking to understand contemporary Islamic thought and practice around the world - though I regret that he did not include South Asia. De Bellaigue does a good job of crafting a coherent narrative that enriches ones understanding of contemporary political events in many Muslim countries, places that are far from being mired in ancient ideas today, for better and worse.

Ursin Raffainer says

Very informative book.

The author has put a lot of knowledge, details and insights about a broad spectrum of topics in this 470 pages.

To be honest, its not a really fast read because it takes a lot of time to digest all the info presented. But i think thats a good thing in this case.

There arent any unnecessary parts or topics one should have handled in less words, imho.

Me, and i guess many other fellow westerners, dont know half as much as we should about the middle east

and its history. But i think its necessary to educate ourselves not just on our own history. It can help us improve our understanding about each other and thus maybe also help us mitigate conflicts.

Books such as these here need much more public recognition. The sooner we understand and appreciate the fact that other parts of the world have rich and very vital cultural histories, the better for all of us.

The world will never be completely westernized and books such as these can show us where some of the differences lie and why that doesnt have to be a bad thing. (or what happens if we fail to recognize this and try to force our ways onto others)

What i appreciated about the book was that it isnt black and white. It would have been easy enough to be just that. Instead it always tries to show diverse sights of a certain area and time, the good and the bad. It tries to show how furthering the development in one sector will usually trigger developments in other sectors as well and the progress cannot be controlled, since nobody as the sole agency for change.

But the book also shows that many of the processes that have started during colonial times are far from over and east and west still have a lot left to figure out about each other.

This book is a valuable contribution to this dialog and provides many basic facts on which to build further disscussions.

Peter Goodman says

“The Islamic Enlightenment: the struggle between faith and reason, 1798 to modern times,” by Christopher de Bellaigue (Liveright, 2017). An invaluable book for truly understanding what is happening in the Mideast and Iran. He examines the history in three primary locations: Egypt, Istanbul, Iran. Essentially: from the period around Napoleon’s invasion, there were Muslims who saw the western enlightenment, with its use of reason, its interest in human rights and equality, the development of science and empirical investigation, and wanted to bring it to their own cultures. In each place they faced tremendous resistance from the traditionalists and fundamentalists. They tried to imagine a more modern Islam, less bound, more open and flexible. They made good progress, in fact, with support in each country from some of the rulers. There was promise in each place. Iran was already a nation—Persia---with a real history and a real sense of place—in large part the result of geography, a relatively isolated plateau with mountains to the north and west, desert to the west and south, and the sea and India to the east. Turkey was the remains of the Ottoman empire, which had been slowly disintegrating. But along with western ideals came western imperialism and then the Great War. The idealists’ ideas never really penetrated to the general population. Gradually, France, Britain, Italy, Germany developed their own colonies and holdings in the Mideast. The local watched and fumed, basically powerless to withstand western weaponry and social organization. The ideals began to fade. The Great War destroyed what had existed: The Ottoman Empire was dismembered, and the British and French divided the territories with no concern at all about who lived where, what they were. At the same time, reaction grew more powerful: Islam could never reconcile with western ideas. Among the symptoms of Muslim loss was the creation of Israel, a European colony set in the midst of Muslim lands. What this book has done for me is provide an intelligible Muslim context for current politics in the region, and explain underlying feelings about the West. Superbly written. Memorable line: “Progress is its own propaganda.” Ultimately, he says, even the most intolerant and backward-looking Islamist movements have absorbed western ideas, such as rights and the concept of equality. Brilliant.

Bryn Hammond says

Engagingly written, with a few great stories to tell. But his straightforward use of Orientalist tropes was a worry, and I felt his arguments were far too often set up to suit his line, with equivalences that aren't and pertinent information left out until later, when it doesn't spoil the argument.

The first parts had most of these faults. There he gives the impression that Enlightenment (as brought from Europe) was a project with no problems and no downside, and that benighted religion only ever gets in the way. Later this proves not to be so true, when religious people struggle for values such as freedom etc., and progressive religiousness occurs. To present Napoleon in Egypt as if wide-eyed Egyptians had never heard of 'equality', at the start of the book, then 100 pages later, on a different topic, to mention in a sentence Islam's own ideas of equality – this was frustrating.

An example that sticks in my head: on the state of Turkish poetry before the modern turn, he hands over the verdict to a Victorian scholar who is exasperated with it after (for unknown reasons) he has written five volumes on the subject. Poetry may have been in a slump, but we know not to let Victorian gentlemen have the last word. Or else I'd quote the venerable author of *A Literary History of Persia* (four volumes) when he said Turkish names are too laughably barbarous to bother getting right: he'll weary our ears with no more of them.

At the same time I read Marshall Hodgson's account of the Muslim world's collision with European modernity, in the third book of his *The Venture of Islam*. It's old, but Marshall Hodgson was an original, deep thinker (the word genius is used) and a pleasant writer too, not a chore. I suggest the Hodgson.

Laurent Franckx says

This is the second time in just a few weeks that I am writing that a book is required reading, but here we are. This book is dealing with one of the key questions of our time. When people in Europe discuss the integration of Muslim migrants, one of the more enlightened (pun intended) received wisdoms goes more or less like this: "Well, we know that until recently most Christians were rather bigoted, and we know that Christianity was really intolerant, and burned witches and heretics, and organized pogroms against the Jews, and so on, but then we had the enlightenment, and Christianity gradually assimilated the values of the enlightenment, and, in practice, our societies have become completely secularized. While we don't really know why the Christian powers-that-be did not repress liberal philosophers more vehemently, one possible explanation is that Christianity, as a religion was always open to discussion and debate (do you have a choice with four gospels that contradict each other on almost all essential points?). But then Muslims believe that the Quran is the literal word of God, and of course that does not leave much room for discussion. As a result, Islam is an intrinsically backward religion, who will remain stuck forever in the dark ages, and will reject any rational discussion on a topic that might lead to a questioning of the central tenets of the belief." The great merit of De Bellaigue is that he thoroughly debunks this received wisdom. He shows that, when the great powers in the Middle East were confronted with Europe's superior technology, science and organization during the 19 century, after some initial confusion and rejections of modernity, intellectuals became interested in European ideas, and enthusiastically adopted them, up and including Darwinism, a free press and constitutional democracy. I will not repeat the details of De Bellaigue's argument here: there's so much to learn in this splendid book, and, yes, it will change the way you view the world (at least if you've been brought up in a Eurocentric view of the world).

Why not 5 stars, then? There are two major reasons.

First, the book focuses entirely on Egypt, Turkey and Iran, which gives the impression that De Bellaigue conflates Islam with the Middle East. I am not sure Muslims in North Africa, South Asia or Indonesia will

agree with that. The motives for this geographic focus are not clear, but it does leave one with the suspicion that events in those other regions do not fit the main narrative.

Second, the book does not really attempt to answer the questions that are of the greatest interest to us: why did this period of enlightenment eventually fail and what does that bode for the future? De Bellaigue does suggest that the comeback of militant traditional Islamism was mainly the result of resentment against European imperialism and corrupt local elites who took over European values. Maybe. Or could it be that this enlightenment was mainly an elite project that was never internalised by society as a whole? After reading the book, we still have no idea.

As a side note, one point that struck me is the perfidious role of nationalism in this story. We have completely forgotten how, at the end of the 19 century, both the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires were truly multi-ethnic and multi-national. Together with the works of Joseph Roth and Dominic Liven (for instance) I have recently read, this book reminded me what a destructive force nationalism has been.

Christopher says

(Reviewer's Note: I just wrote a more in depth review of this book on my weekly book blog. If you like this review and would like to read more, click on the following link: <https://tobereadnow.blogspot.com/2017...>)

When thinking about the Middle East, modern is not one of the words your average American would ascribe to it. Indeed, if one just peruses right-wing media, you would think that the Middle East has been and always will be defined as in a Hobbesian state of nature. But, as the author of this interesting book points out in his preface, this is a historical fallacy. The Middle East has tried and continues to engage with modernity, but in its own way. Mr. De Bellaigue tries to convey the historic struggle between the Middle East's Islamic identity and the modern world in this book with some mixed results.

Mr. De Bellaigue starts his narrative with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. Napoleon didn't just invade with soldiers though. He brought with him scientists and scholars, laying bear the fact to Egypt, and the Middle East's, denizens that the Islamic world had fallen behind in the production of new ideas and innovations. This had not always been the case as many remembered at the time. Thus began the region's fitful attempts at reform that continue to this day. Mr. De Bellaigue focuses his narrative on three locations: Egypt, Turkey (formerly the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I), and Iran. He shows how public intellectuals engaged with modern thought and technology and how attempts at real reform were often stifled either by conservative rulers or Western imperialists. This is an eye-opening historical revelation.

At least, it would be. However, there are some major problems with this book. The biggest problem is that Mr. De Bellaigue's narrative blends together too much. It is very easy to miss when he has transitioned from one topic to the next, especially since there are no subheadings and few line breaks throughout the book. This isn't as big of a problem in the first three chapters as each one of them focuses on one region's first attempts at modernity, but the problem is still there. It gets worse in the last three chapters when Mr. De Bellaigue begins to talk about all three regions in the same chapter. Then not only is it easy to miss the transition from one public intellectual to the next, but also the transition from one region to the next.

This is not to say that this book is difficult to decipher. Indeed, Mr. De Bellaigue shines when he talks about the great works of literature of some of the great Middle Eastern writers of their time and how their ideas would influence their countries for years to come. Some of their work may even be interesting to look at on their own. However, Mr. De Bellaigue doesn't always give each of these great writers enough space in his book to breathe on their own.

In the end, while this is not the best book on Middle Eastern history (I would recommend *The Arabs: A History* by Eugene Rogan for that), it still may be useful for many Americans to read about the Middle East's attempts to modernize. It would certainly help them put the struggles in the Middle East they see on TV in a broader historical context.

Paul says

In these frankly, traumatic times where various parties are taking more umbrage at each other's point of view and the language is becoming more provocative one of the accusations levelled against the Muslim world is that they are failing to adapt to a modern world and modernise their culture. This has not always been the case though, as back in the nineteenth century the Muslim world embraced change and modern practices, medicine and universal suffrage. In this book on the Islamic Enlightenment, de Bellaigue goes back over 200 years to take us through the history of the region and the politicians, scientists and writers who have been key to driving the change in the region.

This is not a book you can rush, as de Bellaigue takes enormous pains to find the movers and shakers who drove through the change in this Muslim world and tell their story. It is full of complex tales and he is equally critical of the Muslim countries and of the Western states that carved up the region for their own ends whilst using the local political leaders to continue to oppress the populace. The amount of research that has gone into this makes for incredibly dense prose and I found it quite challenging to read. I also felt that sometimes the narrative of the stories of the people got lost in the detail. Will probably become a standard text in its time, but it is possible more for the specialist rather than the general reader.

Gayla Bassham says

This is a dense and sometimes difficult read, but ultimately a rewarding one. I felt like I learned a lot from it, and it made me eager to read more about the Ottoman Empire and the international politics of the late nineteenth century.

Michael says

More like a two and a half star rating. Not good but not bad.

Ginny says

Terrible writing. Nonexistent editing. Some sentences that are paragraphs long. A few half a page. Common to find 5 line sentences. Punctuation unreliable sometimes inside the quote and sometimes outside at the end of sentences. For this first "American" edition to changes in spelling, conversion of weights and measures from metric.

Oh and the topic, very poorly organized and presented.
