

Islam and the Challenge of Civilization

Abdulwahab Meddeb (translated Jane Kuntz)

New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 175 pages.

Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Islam and the Challenge of Civilization* offers new perspectives on and fresh associations among historical events in a way that draws the curtain and adjusts the view among Muslim public intellectuals. Situated within the broad scholarship of Islamic thought, it engages critically and creatively with various doctrinal issues that are being manipulated by some Muslim opinion leaders to support their own bellicose positions. The

author reveals the linkages between Islam and other revealed faiths, especially during the former's "golden age," which witnessed productive encounters between theologians and philosophers of diverse religious orientations.

The book comprises six chapters in addition to a prologue, an epilogue, notes, and two appendices. In his prologue, the author argues that "violence produced by belief is not unique to Islam but finds virulent expression even among beliefs issuing from the Indian subcontinent" (p. viii) and emphasizes the need for a "check on violence via the return to context" (p. ix). He seeks to awaken Muslims "to the fact that times have changed" (p. x) and that "the world is a different place" (p. x), which is why "when it comes to religious identity" (p. x), Islam cannot continue to "perceive Christianity as if it were still its medieval antagonist, despite modern notions of nations and peoples that have circumscribed the religion" (p. x). The following statement sums up the author's thesis: "In short, if Islam is to be cured of its current affliction, it must get to that post-Islamic, post-religious place where Christianity and Judaism have managed to arrive" (p. x). This sounds interesting and prompts a meticulous reader to watch out for an elaboration thereof. Unfortunately, such an elaboration never appears.

In chapter 1, "The Koran as Myth," the author narrates his relationship to Arabic, especially what he describes as "Koranic Arabic" (p. 1), and how he "learned the Koran by heart, understanding virtually nothing" (p. 3). He states that this exposure endowed him "with penchant for . . . poetic reading" (p. 3) and led to his appreciation of Arabic's "scansion, the way the combination of vowels and consonants produced a musicality" (p. 3). He dwells extensively on various aspects of those Islamic sciences related to the Qur'an, among them syntax, morphology, philology, and Qur'anic exegesis. Of great interest is the author's allusion to Ibn 'Arabi in arguing that it is not coincidence that both the Bible and the Qur'an begin with "b": *bara'a*, "to create," for the former, and *bism*, "in the name of," for the latter (p. 10).

Meddeb pursues this line of reasoning in chapter 2, "The Clash of Interpretations," where he exposes the scriptural justifications upon which Muslim fundamentalists depend and seeks to offer an ameliorative proposal grounded in his argument made in the previous chapter. He underscores the importance of returning to the Qur'anic text with a view to engaging in the "war of interpretation" (p. 13). He specifically mentions Q. 9:29, which he says "has come to be known in the exegetic tradition as the War Verse (Koran 9:29)" (p. 13), and Q. 16:125, which contains *bi'l-lati hiya ahsan* (in a way that is best). This latter one, according to him, is "frequently used in common discourse: Whenever a controversy or conflict arises" (p. 16). He also asserts that the "war

verse” is found in *Sūrat al-Tawbah* (the Chapter of Repentance, the only one to begin without the *basmallah*). He enumerates how this Qur’anic injunction has provided the “energy” for several terrorist operations, such as the Armed Islamic Group (AIG) in Algeria in 1996, Hamas in Israel, and even 9/11 in the United States. However, he juxtaposes the “wisdom and good instruction (16:125) verse as a sharp contrast to the war verse, which is why its core message is frequently involved to return the disagreement to a level of civility so as to avoid violence, even if the parties remain irreconcilable” (p. 16).

Chapter 3, “On the Arab Decline,” spans barely ten pages and yet is replete with useful information. For example:

A 2002 report by the United Nations Development Programme provides a chilling illustration. Among Arab nations, 50 percent of women are illiterates. Only 330 books are translated every year in this vast part of the world. This is three times fewer than in the single, relatively small country of Greece, which itself is hardly a model of present greatness, suffering as it does from the same identity syndrome of a meager contemporary culture as compared to the glory of its founders who, 2500 years ago, produced a culture that has survived to remind today’s Greeks of their origins.

The author also states that the gross national product of all Arab countries, including the oil producers, cannot match that of Spain. Similar stunning revelations follow, all of them supported with robust facts and figures. The implication of this unfortunate state is analyzed in chapter 4, “Civilization or Extinction,” which addresses the fundamentalists’ actions and their implications as to how they affect people’s “understanding of Islam as a complex historical phenomenon” (p. 49). After providing an impressive account of the concepts of identity and vision in connection with Islamic civilization, he wonders why Muslims tend to reject other civilizations as “barbarous” (p. 50).

In chapter 5, “Enlightenment between High and Low Voltage,” Meddeb traces the origin of enlightenment in the Islamic tradition. He identifies the ninth century onward and the nineteenth century as “two distinct periods” of enlightenment (p. 86). The pioneering role of Ibn al-Muqaffa’ in critical enlightenment among Muslims receives adequate attention; however, the author associates him with the cohort of critical scholars and free thinkers, like the Christian Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873) and al-Warraq (d. 861). He links Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Sheikh Ali Abderraziq (d. 1988), Taha Hussayn (d. 1973) and others with this enlightenment, yet maintains that they failed to achieve desirable results because of the “misguided” nature of their modernization efforts (p. 98); their fear of radical thinking, which advocates “break

and separation” (p. 99); and “anti-Westernism as an ideology of combat elaborated by religious fundamentalists” (p. 99). Meddeb therefore proposes a re-thinking of the Enlightenment’s and Nature’s legacies, as well as humanity’s attitudes toward “safeguarding of what remains of it, i.e. Nature in an ailing world” (p. 102).

Chapter 6, “The Physics and Metaphysics of Nature,” seeks to articulate the Qur’anic and the Biblical understandings of nature. He describes nature as a “divine gift” bestowed upon man to have dominion over and enjoy” (p. 103). Grounded on the perception that the Qur’anic view of nature is “assimilated to creation,” his analysis revolves around the linkage between the concepts of physics and metaphysics. But while he brilliantly employs the Qur’anic view to articulate water’s centrality to the physical world, he fails to show that it is equally central, or at least of considerable value, to the metaphysical world. Yet the author deserves praise for his desire “to see two hands at work, one Muslim, the other Christian, which would correspond to a more fruitful effect of Andalusia’s interfaith cohabitation and the hospitality granted by the Islamic city when ruled by power capable of welcoming difference” (p. 115).

Despite its overall excellence, a careful revision of a few caveats may enhance its quality. For example, his overreliance on Ibn ‘Arabi, whom he quotes repeatedly without subjecting his claims to any critical examination, is curious. Meddeb writes: “Man, created in the image of God, is his successor on earth, as the Koran emphasizes, for Man in general and addressed to David in particular” (p. 112). This is a theological gaffe, for where does the Qur’an emphasize this? Linguistic errors include “Arab man” (p. 114) instead of “the Arab man,” “a merging of the two” (p. 114) instead of “a merger,” and “the belief... are many” (p. 125) instead of “the beliefs...”

Furthermore, several terms have been mistranslated: *dhakir* (p. 4) instead of *dhakira* as “memory,” *al-quwwa al-ma’ani* (p. 4) instead of *quwwa al-ma’ani* as the power of discrimination, and “familiarized” (p. 4) instead of familiar “meaning” as *al-ma’ani al-ma’lufa*, for “familiarized” is better translated in this context as *mu’taada*. There is an unfortunate instance of transliterating *ma’arifa* (p. 4) instead of *ma’rifa* (prior knowledge). Also incorrect is *kun qur’an fi nafsika* (p. xi) instead of *qur’anan*, which is faithful to the Arabic syntactical principles governing *kana wa akhwatuha* (*kana* and her sisters). The book’s overall quality, however, should make it of great interest to scholars, teachers, and researchers on Islamic thought and contemporary studies.

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