

IMAD-AD-DEAN AHMAD AND AHMED YOUSEF, *Islam and the West: A Dialogue*, United Association for Studies and Research, Springfield, VA, and American Muslim Foundation, New York, 1998, Pages 250, ISBN1-882669-17-7, Price £12.95

REVIEWED BY YOGINDER SIKAND

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam has come to be seen by sections in the West as the great, menacing 'Other'. Samuel Huntington and his likes have been tirelessly stressing that Western Civilisation now faces a grave threat from the Muslim world, and have cautioned Western governments to take the challenge of Islam seriously. Scores of books have been written on the subject to drive home the same message. The 'clash of civilisations' threatens to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. That Islamic revivalism is not necessarily anti-Western is the point that this immensely readable book seeks to make. It consists of a series of discussions between nine leading non-Muslim Western scholars of Islam, mostly US-based, and Muslim scholars and Islamist activists, some from the US and others from the Arab world. As such, this dialogue is a pioneering effort to bring Islamists and scholars in the West who write about them on to a common platform so that they could exchange views, clarify their misconceptions and arrive at at least some basic minimum consensus. A wide range of issues are discussed thread-bare, ranging from Western imperialism and racism to women's issues and Islamist democracy, that, put together, shed much light on what is a little understood phenomenon. A striking feature of the presentations included in this volume is the concern on the part of Western analysts of Islamist movements to judge them on the basis of the threat, if any, that they pose to Western, specifically American, interests. That itself is hardly surprising, for this is their primary responsibility as opinion-makers and advisors to the American authorities. Yet, the perceptive reader can hardly help feeling that the Islamist project is seen through coloured, Western lenses and not as a phenomenon in itself, with its own standards and its own legitimate world-view. That itself is hardly the way to launch a genuine dialogue between Islam and the West.

Nevertheless, the frankness with which the presenters discuss their own perceptions of Islamism is commendable. Graham Fuller, for instance, in his paper 'Islamic Movements and Western Interests: Strategic Imperatives', is

honest enough to admit that the way Western governments would deal with Islamic movements critically hinges on what the implications of the Islamist project would be for Western strategic imperatives, particularly access to oil and Middle Eastern markets and the safety of Israel. Anthony Sullivan takes roughly the same conservative position, and argues that although Islamic movements may differ with the West on crucial issues such as these, they could learn to co-operate to jointly defend private enterprise and traditional social values. Sullivan sees Islamists as radical in rhetoric but conservatives when it comes to economics, and hence perceives possibilities of collaboration between them and conservative sections in the West. Alternate Islamic voices that call for an interventionist state that actively seeks to improve the living conditions of the poor are completely ignored.

A major concern of some of the presentations included in this volume is to account for the origins and emergence of Islamist movements in large parts of the Muslim world. Although on some points they seem to disagree, the general consensus that they arrive at is that Islamism is a negative reaction to the failure of secular, nationalist regimes to improve the living standards of ordinary Muslims. Rather than see the emergence of Islamist movements as a legitimate expression of the growing desire on the part of Muslims to lead their lives in accordance with the teachings of their faith, the presenters locate the phenomenon as developing out of a feeling of frustration and a situation of prolonged economic stagnation and political repression. This, for instance, is the point that Louis Cantori, William Zartman and Robert Neumann make, although with minor variations.

While these may indeed be contributory factors accounting for the timing of Islamist movements, to see the movements as simply reactions to economic and political factors is clearly misleading. Such a perspective fails to understand Islamic movements as participants in the movements would themselves view them. Islamist activists would hardly agree that their commitment emerges not from their own understanding of the Islamic imperative, as they see it, but, instead, from a powerful rage against what the world has promised them but has failed to deliver.

If Islamist movements seem to have acquired mass support in many Arab countries, as some of the presenters admit, the question of how they can be co-opted within the democratic political structure is one that is of crucial

significance for Western policy makers. Contributions by Charles Butterworth, Joyce Davis and Michael Dunn in this volume reflect this concern of how Islamism can be reconciled, if at all, with political pluralism. Western-style political democracy is seen, by some presenters, to be the normative, universal style of conducting politics which Muslims should abide by. There seems to be a distinct lack of appreciation for alternate conceptions of democracy that some modern Muslim scholars have evolved, which are grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. One need not necessarily agree with all of this, but clearly these alternate views need to be examined.

On the whole, however, this book excels and is certainly compulsory reading for anyone interested in relations between Islam and the West today. Its concern with the Arab world, rather than with the Muslim world as a whole, is, however, unfortunate, as are the typographical errors that abound.