

UNSEEN WORLDS

Islam's forgotten reformation

By Yasmine Seale

Discussed in this essay:

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

Modern Times, by Christopher de Bellaigue. Liveright. 432 pages. \$35.

The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History, by Cemil Aydin.

Harvard University Press. 304 pages. \$29.95.

The Story of Reason in Islam, by Sari Nusseibeh. Stanford University Press. 288 pages. \$29.95.

Letters to a Young Muslim, by Omar Saif Ghobash. Picador. 272 pages. \$22.

Early in January 1989, a man who had led a revolution wrote to a man who was trying to bury one. “Mr. Gorbachev!” the letter said. “Reality must be faced.” Three emissaries were sent to Moscow, where for two hours they made the case that Marxism had failed to meet “the real needs of mankind.” The Western world, on the other hand, offered nothing but vulgar materialism. They proposed an alternative, a way “to help fill up the ideological vacuum of your system.” After some thought, the secretary-general of the Communist Party politely declined the Iranians’ invitation to embrace Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini, on hearing the news, was disappointed. He had wanted, he said, “to open a door from the unseen world” to the Russian people.

In historical terms, this story is a footnote, but it, too, seems to open a door from the unseen world. What if Gorbachev had said yes? After his fall from power, he expressed regret at not having given the offer more thought. In any case, the prospect of mass Soviet conversion is less interesting than the encounter itself. As an improbable meeting of two systems often thought to be rigid and unreformable, it warns us against thinking too rigidly ourselves. Khomeini was talking, of course, about the hidden world of belief. But more than that remains unseen today; the episode encourages us to look for other doors.

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How do we talk about Islam? The ways are few and narrow. One involves prefacing discussion of any aspect of its civilization, however ancient or arcane, with caveats about present horrors committed by a few in its name. No doubt such remarks are an acknowledgment of confusion, of the difficulty of thinking through a complex subject outside the terms set by the news cycle. But they are also, I suspect, a shibboleth, a Masonic handshake meant to convey that one is on the right side of darkness. I know of no other issue that requires the affirmation of basic decency before debate can take place.

Four new books get this rhetorical move out of the way early on. They also, by various means, attempt to stretch the straitjacket. They speak in different voices—personal, popularizing, academic—but have in common a kind of restlessness, a side shuffle, a desire to take the way we talk about Islam off-piste.

With *The Islamic Enlightenment*, Christopher de Bellaigue, the author of several fine books on Turkey and Iran, sets out to correct a mistaken belief. “Islam needs its Enlightenment,” goes the refrain; “Islam needs a Reformation, a Renaissance and a sense of humour.” In fact, he writes in his introduction, those who call for such reforms “are opening the door on a horse that bolted long ago.”

What follows is an account of the horse’s journey: a stylishly written,

surprisingly moving chronicle of intellectual and political flourishing in Egypt, Turkey, and Iran—“the brain of Islam”—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We trail some extraordinary figures, each of whom sought to integrate Islamic and European ideas: Rifaa al-Tahtawi, Egypt’s “forward-thinking mandarin,” the first Arab to use the word *jumhuriyya* (“republic”); the gay savant Hassan al-Attar, who, between prolific writings in defense of logic and astronomy, enabled the first official dissection in Egypt; the polymath Ibrahim Şinasi, who released Turkish poetry from its “dungeon of precedent”; Mirza Saleh Shirazi, “bookworm and xenophile,” who put out Iran’s first newspaper; Beşir Fuat, “ardent Voltairian,” who penned a real-time account of his own suicide; Halide Edib Adivar, who wrote a futuristic novel about the rise of the Turkish nation before helping to usher those visions into reality; and Ali Shariati, “Iran’s space-age Luther.”

Belying his simplistic subtitle (*The Struggle Between Faith and Reason*), de Bellaigue spins a web of tensions. One strand sets subtle minds such as these against “Islam’s progressive autocrats,” those “impatient transformers” who sought to modernize by force. Tahtawi spent much of his career “at the mercy of viceregal whim.” Namik Kemal, whose vision for a parliament in Istanbul would have a formative effect on his country’s politics, lost years to exile. Reform-minded despots saw their efforts thwarted in turn by recalcitrant mullahs: Amir Kabir, Iran’s merciless modernizer, “could no more than nibble at the clergy’s judicial powers.” And despite Sultan Mahmud’s persistent efforts against the plague, it took the intervention of the highest-ranking cleric, around 1850, to convince the people of Istanbul of the benefits of quarantine, which, “with a suddenness that must have been stunning,” eradicated the disease.

We learn about changing attitudes toward slavery and sex, the education of women and the dilution of faith (“the human intellect was elbowing the divine Creator aside”). From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, “the promise inherent in Western knowledge was offset by the terrifying

advance of the European powers”—the French into Tunisia in 1881, the British into Egypt the following year, to say nothing of the Anglo–Russian contest that destabilized much of Asia—and the narrative homes in on the struggle for Muslim self-determination against imperial encroachments. In other words, it becomes a story about the politics of resistance, which increasingly involved the assertion of global Muslim unity against colonial incursions. This line of thought, known as pan-Islamism, was at first scant on theology; later it would develop a fundamentalist branch.

In their use of new technologies, mass mobilization, and concepts such as justice and progress, these militant movements were as modern as the ideas they opposed (“To its intense irritation, Islamism itself was shot through with Enlightenment values”), but the politicization of religion sits uneasily within the terms de Bellaigue has set himself. The rise of pan-Islamic thought is told with care, but to call it a “counter-Enlightenment” is misleading. He writes that “from a defensive starting point the modern Islamic world became a poor producer of original ideas,” which is another way of saying that when your country is being occupied, science and philosophy might not be your first concerns.

Upheavals of thought have an austere drama, which de Bellaigue conveys with flair. In what might have been a thicket of isms it is hard to find a dull sentence. The Suez Canal was “a bone with one end in France’s maw and the other in Britain’s,” Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul “a neoclassical meringue with all the mod cons.” This is history in the grand style: men “hurdle” seas, “vault” mountains, and “sire” incredible numbers of children. De Bellaigue correctly warns us “against taking orientalist writing on trust,” though he does not always follow his own advice. Not

since the death of Queen Victoria can a book have resorted so often to the word “benighted.” The cosmopolitan inhabitants of Alexandria are “half-breeds,” Cairo “an untameable bazaar of ideas,” the political theory known as Ottomanism “an exotic big yurt arrangement.” The following sentence would not have been out of place in a piece of *fin-de-siècle* reportage:



It does not escape the attention of inquisitive Westerners who travel to Muslim countries that for the people there the challenge of modernity is the overwhelming fact of their lives.

This affable condescension extends to physical descriptions: one ruler is “corpulent, generously moustachioed, forbidding,” another is “massively bearded, bejewelled, mega-fecund.” Huda Shaarawi, the campaigner for women’s rights, is “beautiful.” By con-

trast, Antoine Clot, the physician who set up a school of midwifery in Egypt, is simply “the civilising Frenchman.”

My larger complaint, however, is one less of tone than of framing. For in that magical word, “modernity,” lies a shaky conceit shored up by a bewildering array of metaphors. “Jane Eyre is modern,” and so are “the potato, kerosene lamps, wire nails and sewing machines,” pianos and blotting paper, rifles and bow ties. Modernity is something you might “manipulate” or “delay” but that “no one” could “stop,” something you could “teeter on the edge of,” “miss out on,” or, if you were lucky, be “smiled on by”; it is a “wave,” a “race,” a “sprint,” an “animal,” a “call” that “cannot be unheard” and “quivers in the air,” a “contagion,” a “hothouse,” a “blast.” It has “many faces.”

This haziness leads to some strange contortions. Coercive reformers “set up new, modern institutions but the ethos inside them was not always modern.” Riffa al-Tahtawi was by any standards a remarkable man, but was Egypt really “a country whose modern meaning he can be said to have invented”? And then there are the flights of raw enthusiasm: “Who could resist the power of autonomous judgment encouraged by the printed newspaper, or fail to hear in the tick of a modern watch the reordering of time itself?” Who indeed? I couldn’t help but identify with the illiterate porters who are said to have accosted Rıza Tevfik, one of the Young Turks who restored the dormant Ottoman constitution in their revolt of 1908.

“Tell us what the constitution means,” the porters yelled. Tevfik replied, “Constitution is such a great thing that those who do not know it are donkeys.” “We are donkeys!” the porters roared back good-naturedly.

Perhaps it would be better to resign oneself to donkeyhood. But when

modernity encompasses everything from vaccination to warfare, it is hard not to ask what exactly is being celebrated. For to argue, as de Bellaigue does, that “for the past two centuries Islam has been going through a pained yet exhilarating transformation” is merely to make the case that Muslims, too, are part of history, that the nineteenth century brought disorder, improvement, and trauma to their lives as it did to others’. It is only a slight exaggeration to say the implicit claim of this book is that Muslims are not martians after all: they aspire—who would have thought?—to the same freedoms, are receptive to the same ideas, and, given the chance, are capable of the same achievements as anyone else. That these assertions, which border on the tautological, can be passed off as a defense of Islam against its detractors is perhaps a sign of the current political climate in the West. But “assumptions of wilful Muslim backwardness,” wrong as they are and widespread as they may be, should not be the only way of framing the history of Muslims.

In February, de Bellaigue published a digest of his book in the *Guardian* under the title “Trump’s Dangerous Delusions about Islam.” To the bigots in the White House he offered the “picture of a Middle East that embraced many aspects of modernity,” which rich tableau “should give the lie to the caricature of centuries of incurable Islamic stagnancy.” The hope seemed to be that if only the ideologues in government and their followers got wind of the Islamic Enlightenment—railroads! periodicals! quarantine!—maybe they wouldn’t hate Muslims so much. If only Steve Bannon knew that one of the grand muftis spoke French with a Parisian accent, maybe we could all be friends! But to suggest that anti-Muslim feeling can be put down to ignorance of Islam’s liberal “moment” is, I think, to err twice: it ennobles modernity as a cure-all, and it misunderstands the nature and history of racism itself.

When Khomeini wrote his letter to the Soviets “on behalf of the Muslim world,” the very idea of such an entity was no more than a hundred

years old. In *The Idea of the Muslim World*, from which that anecdote is lifted, the historian Cemil Aydin attempts a “critical genealogy” of a notion often taken to be timeless. In fact, he argues, Muslims had not dreamed of political unity until the arrival of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. This book covers the same period as *The Islamic Enlightenment*, but Aydin would dispute that the principal struggle of that time was between faith and reason. He contends that the importance of Islam in politics derives from the imperial tactic of ordering humanity by race and the strategies of resistance to it. He agrees that a “reformation” did take place, but maintains that it consisted of “fixing the content and principles of Islam” in order to create a united front. As followers of a unified, universal religion, Muslims were then in a stronger position to appropriate and respond to “secular European ideologies” like the Enlightenment.

The word “ideology” is important. Although de Bellaigue spends a lot of time identifying where Muslims drew on and fell short of Enlightenment principles, he leaves unexamined the conditions from which those principles arose in Europe. Reason and Progress are seen as fixed stars to whose orbit he has added a benighted planet, leaving the cosmology intact. His project falters where it takes the Enlightenment on its own terms, rather than as a historically contingent phenomenon like any other. Aydin’s approach corrects this astigmatism. But to him, the ideas that Muslims defined themselves against were not so much those of the Enlightenment as of Christian nationalism. European sympathy for Christian self-determination in the mid-nineteenth century, just as the Continent’s great powers were ramping up colonization elsewhere, made clear the gulf between imperial norms and practices. Many Muslims wondered why Europeans could celebrate the liberation of their fellow Christians in the Ottoman Empire while they themselves had to submit to foreign control. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the contrast between European

support for Greek independence, achieved in 1830, and the French invasion of Algeria the same year. In 1833, the Algerian scholar Hamdan Khodja wrote an anti-imperial tract (in French) arguing that “destruction of Muslim lives and institutions conflicted with the noble universal values France espoused.”

In Aydin’s telling, the idea of the Muslim world began in response to imperial racism, not to empire itself. Most Muslims, whether under European or Ottoman rule, were loyal subjects; what they sought was fair treatment, not secession. But this world order soon came under pressure: Aydin points to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 as a turning point, when distinctions of faith and race came to overshadow imperial logic. English liberals like Gladstone spoke of saving Christians from Muslim oppression (he called Ottomans an “anti-human specimen of humanity”), a new breed of Western journalists reported on the war with a pro-Christian bias, and Indian Muslims mustered “unprecedented levels of humanitarian sentiment” on behalf of Muslim victims. The Ottomans had been a de facto member of the European club of empires; now they became identified with a distinctive Muslimness.

A new style of empire was emerging, “starkly inflected by race.” From the 1880s, as the Muslim press became more vocal about the rise of racism, both in colonial administration and in the treatment of the Ottoman Empire by Western powers, the idea of Muslim unity took on an anti-imperial color. Missionaries, whose activity increased dramatically in India during this time, were a central part of this process. It was they who began to articulate the idea of Muslims as racially distinct and inferior. Muslim scholars, in an attempt to counter these assertions, positioned Islam as enlightened and tolerant—and Muslims as therefore racially equal to their Western overlords. Instead of rebutting the claim that Muslims were racially homogeneous, as might have been expected, they essentialized Islam on their own terms. The word “Islam” rarely appears in book titles before this pe-

riod, but after the nineteenth century “it is everywhere.”

Rather than focus on Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, Aydin shifts his center of gravity east, to India. *Al-Manar*, the most influential pan-Islamic journal of the time, was published in Cairo, but its largest source of funding was Indian Muslims. There are some fascinating pages about Abdullah Quilliam, an early British convert to Islam who argued that his country, as the biggest Muslim empire in the world (in the 1880s, the British ruled half the world’s Muslims), should partner with the Ottomans. Quilliam’s activities in the 1890s landed him an invitation to Istanbul from the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II, who asked him to deliver a medal to a Nigerian Muslim who had built a large mosque in Lagos. Thus his faith became linked to the geopolitics of the caliphate. When his mosque in Liverpool was targeted by protesters, Quilliam was disturbed that “the overwhelming majority of British Muslims were loyal to the Crown, yet British public opinion . . . was dominated by threatening visions of Muslim disloyalty and barbarism,” when it was the British forces, like those who conquered Sudan in the 1890s, that violated Muslim dignity and rights.

The period from the 1860s to the 1920s was, Aydin writes, “one of the most prolific and productive in Muslim thought across every discipline.” Works in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu were rapidly translated from one language to another. Out of this intellectual ferment emerged a new historical consciousness. In the early nineteenth century, empires had been the main agents of political history, but a hundred years later, civilizational conflict was “the principal lens through which global history was understood.” In this view, Islam and the West were stable entities locked in eternal conflict.

Another popular subject of this era was Islamic civilization itself. Muslim intellectuals also responded to the claims of inferiority by pointing to the luminaries of the Abbasid period (750–1258), Islam’s “golden

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age,” who, through their preservation of ancient Greek culture and their innovations in the arts and sciences, had contributed to the emergence of modern Europe. Thus “the earliest Islamic texts . . . were yoked to an idea, the Muslim world, that would not have made sense in their own time.”

When they heard about Khomeini’s attempt to convert the Soviets to Islam, the clerics of Qom were apoplectic. “Your Holiness,” they wrote, “you have not referred Mr. Gorbachev to the truth of the Holy Koran.” He had relied, unforgivably, on philosophy: “the condemned heretic Avicenna, the Sunni pantheist and arch-mystic Ibn al-Arabi, the works of Sohrawardi who was executed by the Muslims for his ideological deviations.” (The ayatollah responded in kind: “This old father of yours has suffered more from stupid reactionary mullahs than anyone else.”) Yet these medieval thinkers had once been the pride of Islam, and it was their literary and scientific achievements that nineteenth-century intellectuals, in their efforts to prove “the innately progressive orientation of Muslims,” were so keen to rediscover.

The Story of Reason in Islam, by Sari Nusseibeh, is an account of their lives and legacy. Though the author is a professor of philosophy at Al-Quds University, in Jerusalem, and the book is being published by an academic press, it was written with the uninitiated in mind. A note of introduction acknowledges that “the average Western reader” might be surprised by the title, with its juxtaposition of apparently incompatible concepts. There is even an apology for the multitude of Arabic names (“Unfortunately, this obstacle cannot be eliminated entirely”), a consideration rarely shown in works involving English names, although “al-Farabi,” unlike “Worcestershire,” is pronounced how you think it is.

This primer paints an evocative picture of the landscape where Islam arose, a desert world laced with arteries of trade along which poets, merchants, and monks car-

ried new ideas: those of St. Augustine, the “Roman-Algerian bishop,” or of Hypatia, the “Greco-Egyptian mathematician.” The guiding theme is the essential relationship between thought and language, less as a philosophical question than as a historical phenomenon. Insofar as the book tells a story, it is of how Arabic—“a marginal language spoken by a marginal people”—became a medium for the rise of reason, a “*lingua franca* of intellectual discourse” from the seventh century to the eighteenth.

Nusseibeh’s sensitive, elliptical handling of dense metaphysical material echoes one of the book’s central points: that the philosophical tradition in Arabic grew out of a world in which poetry was the preeminent means of expression. Avicenna, the eleventh-century thinker who caused the Iranian clerics such consternation, “identified imagination as the medium of reason”; the transcendence it allows “is nothing if not an act of freedom.” In this account, Mohammed’s message was “a call to break out of confining beliefs and mental habits,” and the Koran marks the first steps in the movement for freedom of thought in Arabic. Exegetes gathered to discuss the meaning of complex verses: perhaps the first university in the world was located in a mosque originally founded by a woman in the ninth century, in present-day Morocco, for precisely this purpose.

“Traumatic intra-Muslim violence” after Mohammed’s death, in 632, and the repressive political order that followed, led to a hardening of views. The suppression of dissent by authoritarian rulers gave rise to the doctrine that human beings had no free will. But it also invited skeptical minds to sift through the holy texts to determine whether such claims were justified. Through skillful weaving of events and ideas, Nusseibeh shows how politics determined the themes—justice, free will, the legitimacy of resisting an unjust leader—that became central to early Islamic thought.

A major dispute concerned whether the Koran was “eternal” or “created.” If the latter was true, the “halo” surrounding the text “simply vanish-

es once subjected to the scrutiny of reason.” At this point, the author’s dispassionate account of the feud gives way to a motif I kept encountering in all the books reviewed here: wistful speculation about what might have been.

In this light, one could theoretically imagine a scenario whereby Muslim scholars . . . convened at regular intervals, whether over decades or centuries, to review what still counts as valid and what does not—what reason dictates that one should retain, and what now offers only historical interest. Such formal convocations might prevent the religion from falling into the hands of individuals or parties using it for selfish or bigoted ends.

Ultimately, the doctrine of the eternal Koran prevailed, and the advocates of “createdness”—of reason—met brutal ends.

From today’s perspective, this looks like a defeat of liberal values. But Nusseibeh warns us against confusing reason and freedom. From the start, “the champions of reason in Islam only took a dim view of values in conflict with their own”; the persecution of Bashar ibn Burd, an eighth-century poet, for his unorthodox beliefs is a case in point. As their movement came to the fore under the Abbasids, the rationalists’ attitude hardened. (How the cult of reason might turn to tyranny is a story familiar from the European Enlightenment.) Early advocates of free thought demarcated “a space within which they could comfortably pursue their own inquiries. It did not extend so far that others could think as they wished.”

The Abbasids clung to power for more than five hundred years, and Baghdad became a haven for intellectuals and scientists. But Baghdad was also home to the *mihna*, a ninth-century inquisition in which the advocates of the created Koran became the persecutors, and dissenters were severely punished. The history of Islam is full of such patterns of alternation. Nusseibeh sees evidence of this cyclical movement in the struggles of the past century, such as that between secular nationalism and Islamism. A balance, he writes, “still has not been struck.”

Why not? For Omar Saif Ghobash, the reason may be that dominant interpretations of Islam have traditionally left little room for doubt, which he defines as “the broad sensation of humility in the face of a world that is continually changing.” Ghobash apparently began his new book, *Letters to a Young Muslim*, as a series of theoretical reflections, before reworking them into themed notes addressed to his fifteen-year-old son. It was an inspired move, turning what might have been a disparate set of thoughts and frustrations into a hopeful handbook for the future. The presence of the young interlocutor (“Saif, these are the questions of your generation”) also serves to focus its more abstract propositions. This is a gentle, cautious work, which addresses thorny questions with a parent’s compassion and a diplomat’s delicate tread. (Ghobash is the Emirati ambassador to Moscow.) It is an ode to gray, the “area of uncertainty and doubt,” a call to resist those who offer comforting convictions.

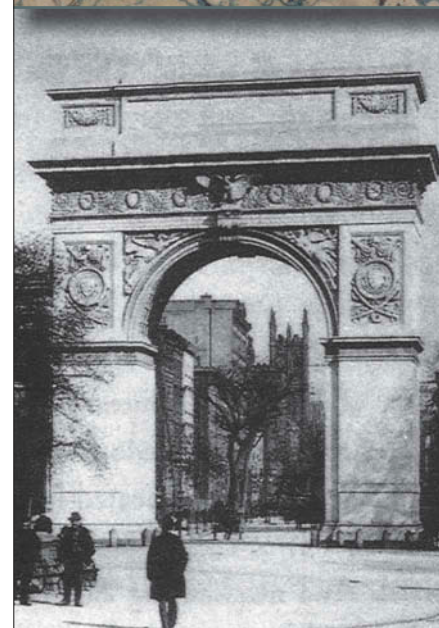
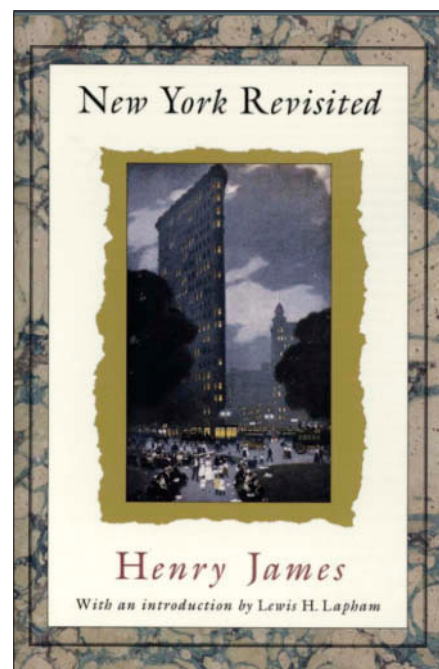
In the hands of a less subtle writer, some of the messages here might have seemed a little pious or cloying. What they advise is unimpeachable: curiosity, empathy, independence of mind. They wear their wisdom so lightly, it is easy to miss the fact that they amount to a sort of manifesto, a manual on how to navigate a religion at war with itself. One of the longer letters argues that it is not enough, in the face of the latest terror attack, to say that Islam is a religion of peace. It is also imperative to lead by example and to take responsibility for the Islam of peace:

If we do not like what the extremists are doing, then we need to call them out on it. It is too easy to say that they have nothing to do with us. They speak in Allah’s name. And they do so convincingly. Even if their reading seems warped and out-of-date, it is a reading ... that has traction, that has popularity. We must react in some way. We must take action.

Violence has been central to the life of the author, who lost his father at the age of six in the first act of ter-

rorism to strike the Emirates. In one of his letters on the subject, he points his finger at aggressive clerics, whose rising voices and simplistic worldviews are a snare for susceptible young men and women. Against those tempted by suicide missions and the promise of heaven, he counters that the more difficult sacrifice is to face complexity. This may be the book’s most valuable lesson. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, from which Ghobash borrows his title, Rilke counsels his correspondent to “be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms.” *Letters to a Young Muslim* is a book full of questions, approached with a great deal of patience and love. If these letters don’t have all the keys, they point to the right doors. Their uses are the uses of digression; they create space for wondering. They complicate.

Ghobash’s soul-searching epistle appears to contradict de Bellaigue, whose book gives the lie to those who demand that Islam examine “its place and conscience in the modern world.” His appeal to doubt also seems to disregard Islam’s long tradition of rational inquiry, which Nusseibeh is at pains to set out. In calling for the religion to reform itself, Ghobash may give the impression of buying into illusory notions of a “Muslim world” that, as Aydin shows, do not stand up to historical scrutiny. Yet in the final analysis, such tensions are superficial. “If you want to be true to your Muslim heritage,” Ghobash writes to his son, “then you need to explore its history properly.” It is worth remembering that these books are written for different audiences: Ghobash is alone among the four in addressing his plea primarily to Muslim readers. His point is not that a reformation has yet to take place, but that it has been obscured and must be rediscovered. In this sense, all four writers are participating in a common project: to present a more varied and nuanced record, one in which the so-called poles of Islam and the West are often deeply connected, and in which the wider gulf divides those who would tell this messy truth from those who would hide it. ■



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BY HENRY JAMES

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