



Rethinking Islam and the West:

A New Narrative
for the Age of
Crises

By Ahmed Paul Keeler

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For the last 200 years, the Islamic world has been trying to understand what went wrong. Have the madrasas become outdated? Did rulers wallow in luxury and debauchery? Or, was it bribery and corruption? For some, the main problem has been presented as being a false understanding of religion. For others, it is the religion itself. Religion occupies Muslims with dogma and promises of an afterlife that does not exist, inhibiting them from scientific and technological advancements. For yet others, the main problem has been the departure from religion. Muslims have corrupted or abandoned the divine teachings of the true religion. Why did the Islamic world fall behind the West? This question casts a shadow almost any discussion the Muslim world is having today.

Ahmed Paul Keeler refuses this question in his eye-opening new book 'Rethinking Islam and the West: A New Narrative for the Age of Crises'. According to Keeler, the Islamic world has not "fallen behind"; rather the modern idea that human history is one of uninterrupted progress and development and that the Islamic world has fallen behind in recent times should be questioned and re-examined altogether. Keeler rejects the idea that the contemporary world represents the most "advanced" and magnificent phase of human history and that the success of cultures should be judged based on their resemblance to today's "developed" Western world. According to him, the modern world represents a deviation in human history. With predatory capitalism, colonialism, obsessive consumerism, hedonistic individualism, and technological advancements that are ultimately irresponsible towards man and disrespectful of nature, the modern world has dragged humanity into a dead end, or 'an age of crises'.

According to Keeler, the crisis of the Islamic world and indeed of all humanity over the past 200 years is a product of the mistakes and wrongdoings of the modern Western world, not the Muslims; it is a result of the unlimited expansion of modern culture which has shattered all the traditional worlds from China and India to Christian Europe and indigenous America. He argues that the Islamic and other traditional civilisations have not fallen behind, but rather that the modern West has crossed a line that had never been

crossed before. It has broken a balance taken by traditional cultures to hold the secret of natural stability and social harmony, and replaced it with the idea of unlimited "progress". The progress of the modern world has come at the expense of immense human suffering and the constant threat of social and natural calamities. It has opened a Pandora's box, out of which emerged weapons of mass destruction, pollution, deforestation, increasing intensity of natural disasters, global warming, superbugs, the collapse of the family, the disappearance of childhood, an epidemic of addictions of all kinds, loneliness, and mental illnesses, terrorism, financial crises and more. The feeling that this path is taking us to a disaster grows every day. A path on which we race, ever faster.

When asked about the impact of the French Revolution, in 1971, Chinese diplomat and later Premier Zhou Enlai famously said, "it is too early to tell". It may indeed be too early to tell if Ahmed Paul Keeler is justified in his dark reflections on the modern world. It surely feels so nowadays as the world faces a global crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to wreak havoc across the world. It must feel the same way for hundreds of millions of people who have been locally victimised by the wonders of the modern world, whether they be the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in Japan, or of Vietnam, or the indigenous populations of America and West Africa, millions of young men who fought and died in two World Wars, or the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen. And, we may find ourselves in increasing agreement with Keeler if even the slightest of the projections climate scientists make about the fate of our planet materialise.

At the same time, it is not easy to overcome the psychological tension that emerges from criticising modernity on an Apple computer. The modern world has allowed humans to live longer lives, travel long distances, enjoy all sorts of pleasures that were not available to premodern peoples. Perhaps there is no hope of gaining back what modern technologies have taken from us, so we continue to live the conundrum of problematising modernity while enjoying and benefiting from its wonders. Turkish poet Ismet Özel says, "we are ready to give back what technology offers us today when it promises to give back what it has taken from us". There may be many who are ready to make this trade if they could.

While criticising the widespread belief about the greatness of our modern world and the failure of the Islamic world to keep up with it, Keeler does not propose a way to escape this anomaly. However, he examines what was before, or what had been lost to the modern world: the *mizān* or 'balance'. Keeler takes the reader on a journey through the ages, telling of the rich heritage of the Islamic civilisation spreading across the globe, and includes interesting sidenotes about other traditional societies. He guides the reader to the great civilisation of Islam and the order of peace and justice it has demonstrated over the centuries in various parts of the world, from Arabia to Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, from Persia and India to the depths of Africa, and as far away as China. He gives the reader a comparative analysis of Islamic teachings with respect to the Western world, relating to power, knowledge, trade, art, environment and conquest. He gives an understanding of a civilisation that originates from an Islamic milieu and is based on the principle of *mizān*; a civilisation that achieves a balance between nature and human, between material and spiritual, and between this world and the other.

Ahmed Paul Keeler's critique of modern progressivism may not offer any practical solutions for contemporary Muslim societies, who often live under the threat of dominance, be it political or cultural. However, he shows Muslims who are convinced of the failure, incompetence, backwardness, ugliness, and even essentially corrupt nature of their own civilisation, why they are wrong. He shows where the actual roots of their problems lay as well as the strength to counter them. He shows them that their deeply embedded guilt and complexes are ultimately unfounded. This arguably represents a step towards building a new narrative. The reader is left with a longing for the past and a fear of the future. Perhaps this is exactly where one starts building a new, alternative future.

It is fair to say that the most important accomplishment of this comprehensive work, the product of Ahmet Paul Keeler's rich and varied experiences and lifelong readings on Western and Islamic societies, is its impressive attempt to instil self-confidence in today's Muslims. This is arguably what Muslims, especially the youth, need most before coming to terms with modernity in one way or another. Given this, it is important that Keeler's book is currently being

translated to Malay, Turkish, Arabic, and several other languages as well. 'Rethinking Islam and the West: A New Narrative for the Age of Crises' is a breath of fresh air for the contemporary Muslim psyche where deep prejudices about both the modern Western and Islamic cultures prevail.