

Book Review

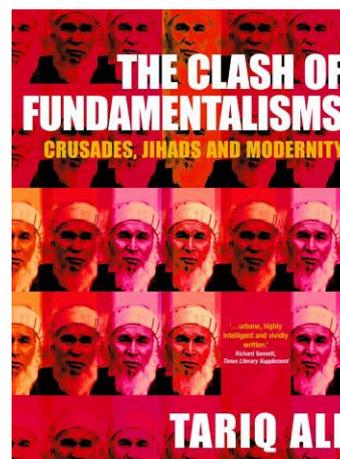
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‘Seeking a Golden Age in Dark Times’: A review of ‘A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity’, by Tariq Ali (Verso, hardback, £15):



In part riposte to Samuel Huntington’s 1994 work, ‘The Clash of Civilisations’, Ali’s book takes the reader on a fascinating journey through history, theology, politics and economics in order to explore the development of the religious and economic manifestations of the anti-Enlightenment thinking known as fundamentalism. He poses implicit questions: What halted philosophical debate within Islam, leading ultimately to its current ‘Dark Age’? How has the US economy developed, militarily, over the past 60 years? And how do these processes relate to each other?



Ali opens by depicting his own complex and diverse Pakistani childhood experience of Islam. Through a narrative both lucid and exciting, he then delves into Islamic history (“...the first two decades of Islam had a distinctly Jacobin feel.”) and draws parallels between the often overtly heretical attitudes of major Islamic thinkers during the ‘Golden Age’ and the new dialecticism beginning to be evidenced in work such as that of British-based writer, Anwar Shaikh. The tensions between urban and rural societies in the manifold practice of Islam and in the development and petrification of its heresies is skilfully explored and Ali concurs with the early C20th South Asian poet, Iqbal, in the view that Islamic culture can only advance if it becomes dialectical and synthetic and concentrates, as it had in its youth, on the finite and the concrete.

As we enter the C20th, Ali focuses in on the Middle East and South Asia and their relationships with the West. In analysing the economic development of the US, Ali canvasses the work not just of progressives, radicals and liberation theologians but also of people like US General Butler (author of ‘War is a Racket’), historian, conservative and ex-US Naval officer Chalmers Johnson and Eisenhower who in his farewell speech to the nation in 1961, explicitly warned Americans against the domination of their democracy by the new and rapidly-expanding military-industrial complex. Post-Soviet collapse, in the global village of banana republics, “all the other

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exit routes [other than the confessional] have been sealed off by the mother of all fundamentalisms, American imperialism... Not so much the end of history as a closure of the Western imagination.” Ali presents the cogent argument that Islamic fundamentalism in its various forms - Wahhabism in the Arabian peninsula, the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt - as well as numerous corrupt despots have been armed and bankrolled as useful tools in regression as a means of control. Leaders who deviate are toppled or assassinated. Hindu fundamentalism and Zionism are likewise dissected and candidly examined.

The poetry of Qabbani (Syria), Khatun (Kashmir) and Faiz (Pakistan) is frequently invoked, as is Abdelrahman Munif’s epic Saudi triptych, ‘Cities of Salt’. In Munif’s words, “...the novel can give a profound reading of a society that can be more important than political history and certainly than any official history.” Yet Ali’s own writing is lucid, un-dogmatic, humorous and rational and in both style and content itself demonstrates an alternative to the texts of the twin fundamentalisms; the paralysing misinformation of militant capitalism and its flipside, the fantasist nihilism of religious regression.

At the climax of the book, in ‘Letter to a Young Muslim’, Ali calls unequivocally for an Islamic Reformation, with separation of state and religion, dissolution of the clergy and the freedom to interpret texts.

‘A Clash of Fundamentalisms’ opens up possibilities for alternative future histories. It is a timely book.