

A Modern Problem

Reviewed by Martin Walker

LIKE MANY OTHER DISAPPOINTED politicians, Ali Allawi turned to the consolations of philosophy and religion. The result is a remarkably thoughtful and engaging assessment of the current state and future prospects of the world of Islam. Allawi is the nephew of the Iraqi exile leader Ahmed Chalabi, who was briefly the darling of Washington's neoconservatives. When Chalabi returned to Iraq upon the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Allawi followed, leaving his life as an Oxford don to serve as minister of trade and defense and then as minister of finance in the first transition governments.

Chastened and disillusioned by the experience, Allawi is now a visiting fellow at Princeton. His 2007 book *The Occupation of Iraq* is by far the best descriptive analysis of the disasters that unfolded when American hopes met Iraqi realities. His new book joins the increasingly crowded debate over the fundamental question of whether Islam can be reconciled with the modern capitalist world.

His answer is a cautious and conditional "yes." He believes that the capitalist West is being forced to change as its citizens recognize that environmental constraints have foreclosed the era of limitless material growth, and that personal ambition should operate within the broader context of the common good. "The rugged, autonomous individual so beloved by liberal philosophers and by Hollywood movies simply cannot exist outside the virtuous community," he writes. "And Islam would add that neither the individual nor the society can be whole if they are not infused with the sense of the transcendent."

But Islam has yet to reconcile with the better aspects of the post-Renaissance and post-Enlightenment West: intellectual freedom,

the questioning of tradition, a commitment to education and the scientific method. Islam's attempts to embrace modernity have taken false and essentially political paths, Allawi argues, whether through Arab nationalism, state socialism, the crazed jihadism of 9/11, or what he condemns as the "legal trickery" of so much modern Islamic finance (which allows some religious figures to line their pockets by certifying that particular investments comply with Islamic law). Allawi has little respect for "the Gulf countries' exuberant embrace of a frantic hypermodernity only scantily garbed in Islamic idioms," and even less for the anti-intellectual Wahhabism he blames for the implosion of Islamic cultural life and creativity.

Allawi overstates the deleterious effect of Wahhabism, which came along centuries after the Mongols and Tamerlane crushed the first great flowering of Islamic civilization. But he is right to point out disparities between what the Islamic world once was and what it is today. "The creative output of the 20 or 30 million Muslims of the Abbasid era [AD 750 to 1258] dwarfs the output of the nearly one-and-a-half billion Muslims of the modern era," he comments sourly. The Muslim countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a 57-member voting bloc in the United Nations, "have 8.5 scientists and technicians per 1,000 population, compared to a world average of 40.7 and a developed-world figure of 139.3."

Allawi devotes much of the book to the intellectual civil war within Islamic theology, asking whether "a modern society, with all its complexities, institutions, and tensions, [can] be built on a vision of the divine." He finds a possible answer in the work of Syed Naquib al-Attas. Born in 1931 in Java, al-Attas attended Sandhurst, the British military academy, and served as an officer in the Malay regiment before becoming a philosopher and teacher. He sought to create an institution to breed "the complete man, . . . a Muslim scholar who is universal in

THE CRISIS OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION.

By Ali A. Allawi.
Yale Univ. Press.
304 pp. \$27.50

his outlook and is authoritative in several branches of related knowledge." In Malaysia in 1987, he founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, which taught in English and quickly became an important center for a generation of Islamic scholars who questioned the traditional Arab dominance of Muslim thought.

But in 2004 al-Attas was forced to retire, and his school was merged into an Islamic university dominated by Saudi-funded rivals. Allawi sees al-Attas as a victim "of an ongoing war, within the world of higher education in Malaysia and the wider Muslim world, around the issue of the meaning of the Islamization of knowledge and of the functions and purposes of an Islamic university." Behind the conflict lies the relentless drive of Wahhabists with unlimited funds who seek to dominate Islamic intellectual life with their tradition-based puritan approach. For Allawi, their mission represents "the closing of the Islamic mind." Wahhabism's triumph is not final, he concludes, but for the moment its success means that "the much-heralded Islamic 'awakening' of recent times will not be a prelude to the rebirth of an Islamic civilization; it will be another episode in its decline."

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Green Thumb and Then Some

Reviewed by Steven Lagerfeld

IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE now to imagine an America in which a plant breeder could become a national celebrity and idol of millions. But that's precisely the story of Luther Burbank (1849–1926), "the Wizard of Santa Rosa," as he

THE GARDEN OF INVENTION:

Luther Burbank and the Business of Breeding Plants.

By Jane S. Smith.
Penguin.
354 pp. \$25.95

was styled in countless magazine articles.

Helen Keller, the king of Belgium, and football star Red Grange made pilgrimages to his home in California's Sonoma Valley. A photo from 1915 shows Burbank sitting on the steps of his house in genial conversation with the two men who were most nearly his peers, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford.

In *The Garden of Invention*, Jane S. Smith, a former academic and the author of a book on the history of the polio vaccine, blows the dust of a million ancient textbooks off Burbank's remarkable story. "No matter what kind of hero you wanted," Smith writes, "it seemed Luther Burbank was a leading candidate"—scientist, sage, guardian of nature, steward of New England virtues, herald of the California dream.

The association with Edison and Ford is telling. Born into comfortable circumstances in Lancaster, Massachu-

setts (near the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed), Burbank was inspired by Charles Darwin's *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*

(1869) to see that he could use his love of nature to join the ranks of the era's heroic inventor/entrepreneurs. Reading Darwin's meticulous documentation of how plants evolved in response to environmental changes, Burbank realized that a shrewd and energetic Yankee could speed up the process by "perturbing" nature and bending it to human needs.

Even before he lit out for California in 1875, Burbank created the blight-resistant Russet Burbank potato, still one of the world's most widely grown varieties. Settling in Santa Rosa and later establishing his experimental farm in nearby Sebastopol, Burbank arrived just as California was being transformed from a raw frontier of cattle ranches and wheat farms into a new Eden, yielding fruits, vegetables, and nuts, and he would play a leading role in this