

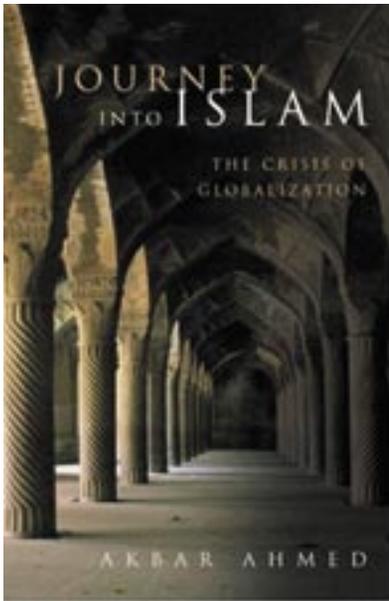
**Book: Journey into Islam –
The Crisis of Globalization**

Author: Akbar Ahmed

Brookings Institution

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Review by Tamara Sonn



This year the world marks the 60th anniversary of the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan.

But the celebrations are muted as the region appears to be at the epicentre of global terrorism, and the world trembles in fear of spreading violence and fanaticism. In this context, Akbar Ahmed, one of Pakistan's most brilliant intellectuals, has produced a work of such remarkable wisdom and clarity that it should be required reading for all those gifted with the privilege of democracy.

Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization is, in many ways, a field guide to the Muslim world. It elucidates its complexities and contradictions with

excruciating honesty, addressing the fears of fanaticism and violence shared by non-Muslims across the globe. But in the process it demonstrates three points of critical importance. First, the violence and fanaticism emanating from the Muslim world reflect very real pain and suffering that is the product of policies, many of which are generated or supported by Western powers. Second, the fear of violence and fanaticism is shared by Muslims as well, the majority of whom suffer in silence the indignities that motivate the extremists, lacking access to the political and economic tools required to change their circumstances. Finally, those who do have such access bear the responsibility to address these realities, and exercise their democratic rights for their own well-being and for all those who depend upon them.

Journey into Islam began as a student-centred anthropological inquiry into Islamic societies. Ahmed led a group of American students on an extended study tour across the Muslim world: from the Middle East through South and Southeast Asia. Ahmed allowed the students to interact with a broad range of students, scholars, professionals, religious activists and leaders, government officials, and heads of state, in a variety of contexts including interviews and formal surveys. The study was designed to determine “how Muslims are constructing their religious identities – and therefore a whole range of actions and strategies” in view of their current situations. But given that their current situations are irrevocably enmeshed with global socioeconomic and political currents – that is, in the context of globalisation, what began as an academic inquiry became a quest. As Ahmed explains, it became “in essence, an attempt to identify the global problems societies face, to suggest solutions, and above all, to appeal to the powerful and prosperous to join in creating wider understanding and friendship between different communities through compassion, wisdom, and restraint.”

Readers accompany Ahmed as he prepares and then accompanies his students, beginning with exquisitely

distilled doses of the anthropological and historical background necessary to benefit from the experiences of the journey. In his first two chapters, Ahmed explains the issues under scrutiny and the methodologies used to explore them. Students focus on the question of role models in their surveys to pursue questions elegantly crafted to elicit motivating perceptions and core values. By identifying the individuals most admired, past and present, informants reveal their ideological orientations within the broad spectrum of Islamic viewpoints as well as their own self-understanding and perceptions of the world around them. Ahmed identifies three archetypes – “Ajmer” to refer to Sufi orientations that stress spirituality and universalism; “Deoband” to refer to “mainstream Islamic movements,” characteristically activist and reformist but largely conservative socially and sometimes associated with extremism; and “Aligarh” to refer to modernist approaches. He acknowledges that these distinctions are approximate, broad, that they often overlap, and that not all Muslims fit into any of them. But they provide a useful compass to navigate the often confusing array of Islamic movements in the world today.

With characteristic candour, Ahmed points out the reciprocity of fear. While the average American may live in fear of terrorists attempting to destroy their way of life, the average Muslim feels that the most important problem they face is the West's overwhelming hostility toward their religion. Especially palpable when Muslims speak out on the issues of violence in Iraq and the worsening plight of Palestinians, “Islamophobia” predictably leads to rising anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. Again, globalisation is the key factor. Not only are people in the West benefiting enormously from the internationalisation of the West's corporate culture, but thanks to one part of it – instantaneous global communications – the rest of the world is aware of the “greatly increasing asymmetry in living conditions” reflected in the fact that “358 individuals own more financial wealth than half of the world's

population collectively.” The suffering resulting from war and poverty accounts for Muslims’ perception of the West as motivated by greed, anger, and ignorance.

Chapter three, “Tribes, Women, and Honor in the Age of Globalization,” provides anthropological insights into nature and functioning of tribal identities, essential for those seeking to understand the difference between Islamic values and the atrocities committed by people who happen to be Muslim. The chapter provides analyses that shed light on ongoing developments in Pakistan, such as President Musharraf’s “ill-fated bombardment of Waziristan in search of terrorists.” Ahmed points out that the campaign resulted in Musharraf’s “ignominious retreat and the establishment of a new variety of Taliban with its own territory and flag, known as the Islamic Emirate of Waziristan.” Among the book’s most dazzling passages is the analysis of the potent mix of religious and tribal identity – “fusing Islamic order [and] tribal custom.” Believing their religion is under attack, tribesmen are convinced that their vengeance is justified. In the same context, Ahmed explains the phenomenon of women serving as symbols of tribal honour – and some of its hideous repercussions.

The real core of the book appears in the fourth and fifth chapters. Chapter four, “Who Is Defining Islam after 9/11 and Why?” explains what appears to many Muslims to be a deliberate effort by Washington neoconservatives to replace their former nemesis, the USSR, with “radical Islam,” in order to protect the vast wealth produced by their hold on the military-industrial complex. This entails not only waging ongoing wars, but also vilifying those who speak out against policies discriminatory to Muslim communities and valorising critics of Islam – none of which goes unnoticed in the context of global e-communication. “The Clash of Civilizations?” then describes the standoff in the Muslim perception, epitomising the US occupying Iraq and Afghanistan; supporting Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory in

defiance of UN Security Council resolutions outstanding since 1967; placing forces in the Arabian peninsula and Persian Gulf, and supporting undemocratic regimes in Egypt and Pakistan, whilst all the while beaming vapid and vulgar video culture around the world. This of course includes anti-Islamic vitriol in Hollywood blockbusters and even video games, such as “Eternal Forces” in which players fight on behalf of Christ’s army against the anti-Christ army. Ahmed shows that these realities are the source of a range of reactions throughout the Muslim world – Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim, Sunni and Shi’a, religious and secular – but they are all negative. They lead to anger, resentment, depression, despair, and suicide even among the general populace. The channelling of such sentiments into deadly terror plots among the radicals, while remaining heinous, becomes at least comprehensible.

In the dramatic close of the book, chapter six, “Lifting the Veil,” Ahmed gives testament to the transformative effects of knowledge and compassion. Readers are introduced in chapter one to Aijaz, who calmly explained, “The actions of Osama bin Laden, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Taliban, even if they kill women and children, are perfectly justified in Islam.” Through his interaction with Ahmed and his cadre of earnest students, Aijaz came to recognise that his perceptions of the West were inaccurate, and that his Islamic faith demanded the search for peace. That example and others lead Ahmed to conclude, “Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, young and old, men and women, American, Pakistanis, and Indians – countless examples illustrate the capacity of human beings to attain moral heights in the most difficult circumstances.” The epilogue confirms that people of all faiths share essential values. He quotes colleagues in his extensive interfaith efforts, Rabbi Bruce Lustig and Bishop John Chane, who agree that the “goodness and vitality in individuals of every race and religion” must be called upon for the service of our shared humanity. The book ends with a plea: “To transcend race, tribe,

and religion and cherish our common humanity, every individual must become the message, conveyed by one simple word: that is the hope of the world.”

In many ways, this book is an abbreviated memoir of an exceptional life lived in the service of his religion and country, in pursuit of the core Islamic values – justice (*‘adl*), compassion/goodness (*ihsan*), and knowledge (*‘ilm*) – which Ahmed believes are universal. At the same time, it is a call for help in that very pursuit. It is therefore, a deeply moral work, informed by profound commitment to universal values of knowledge, justice, and compassion, all of which work to confirm Ahmed’s position as preeminent Muslim public intellectual. Ultimately, a generous and empowering work which allows the kind of understanding that is transformative, *Journey into Islam* is as an extraordinary venture for its readers as it was for the students involved in its making. ■

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