



Introduction

This book is like a shattered mirror reconstructed from fragments which once belonged to a single, well-polished mirror in which one could see reflections of countless lives lived within that marvelous ensemble of cultures, races, languages, and ways of life which was brought together by Islam under one, over-arching spiritual umbrella through its characteristic emphasis on the Oneness of Creator, succinctly stated in the *Surah of Sincerity* as *Say: He, Allah, is One; Allah—The Eternally Sufficient unto Himself; He begetteth not and He is not begotten; and there is none like Him.*

Revealed to the Prophet of Islam during the initial years of his prophetic mission, this proclamation of *Tawhīd*, which is repeated in the Qurʾān in various forms and ways, is one of the five fundamentals of Islam which form the core of every Muslim's belief. The other four, of course, are belief in the Hereafter, the angels; the Last Day, and the prophets. This book is about the people who share these beliefs and who now constitute about one fourth of all human beings living on Earth.

The mirror of this book reflects ways in which these beliefs have been lived by the community of believers, a community which the Noble Qurʾān calls "the community of the middle way." The main concern of the book is, however, neither the narration of historical events nor theoretical discussions on the role of Islam in the transformation of various people who embraced Islam and joined the community; the main theme of this book is the encounter of this set of beliefs and people who practice these beliefs with modern Western civilization, an encounter which, the book argues, resulted in the shattering of the mirror. This book is, therefore, an attempt to explore and examine those events and critical encounters which have contributed to the shattering of the mirror whose pieces are traced in this book in

order to once again reflect that vision of life and death which existed throughout the traditional lands of Islam. What is meant by ‘traditional lands of Islam’ are those regions of the world in which Muslims have lived for centuries, comprising a vast region whose boundaries were more or less stabilized by the tenth century. The social and political life of the Muslim community in this vast region was far from idyllic, static, or free from human caprice, but despite all the battles, migrations, blood baths, and numerous changes brought by internal feuds and external invasions, life in this region was lived within an Islamic space which was defined by an over-arching framework of existence based on Islam. In some cases, this span of stability extended over a millennium; in others, it spanned centuries.

What is meant by “Islamic space” may not be obvious to readers who do not have an experiential taste of living in a sanctified space filled with the conscious remembrance of Allah. Islamic space here denotes a spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and social environment in which the reality of the Lord of all the worlds reigns supreme. In such a space, all human interactions as well as all social and economic transactions are characterized by an ever-present concern for the Hereafter (*al-Ākhirah*) which perpetually remains the focus of every believer throughout his or her residence on Earth. This concern with the Hereafter is not merely a theoretical or passive understanding; it is the most active element which permeates Islamic space and constructs a social, economical, and cultural framework of existence for the community of believers whose life is regulated by the five daily obligatory prayers, the month of fasting, the season of Ḥajj, and numerous other rites and rituals of Islam which in such a milieu is a living reality, not abstract ideas or beliefs.

The book argues that this Islamic space has been shattered during the last three centuries primarily due to the encounter of Muslim societies with modern Western civilization, which emerged after the European Renaissance through a revolt against God. This is an obvious reality of our times; anyone who encounters the Muslim world immediately realizes that these societies are living in a state of schizophrenia. The book describes, analyzes, and explores various levels of this encounter and the resulting fissure.

Another premise of the book is that although Islamic space has been shattered by the post-Renaissance encounter between Muslims and the West and although, like a shattered mirror, it can never be put together again to reconstruct what it was before the encounter, there remain certain islands of that Islamic space which provide prototypes to understand the nature of life in Muslim societies prior to this encounter. These islands, where one can still experience a truly Islamic way of life permeated with an ever-present remembrance of the Creator, can be found not only in certain remote regions and deserts where the devastation caused by the encounter between Muslims and modern Western civilization has not yet been felt with the same intensity, but also in the very heart of certain ancient cosmopolitan cities such as Istanbul, Damascus, Fez, and Cairo.

Definitive Encounters is neither an idealized past nor an imagined present; it is a description of an experiential reality, an attempt to reconstruct that unique but now shattered mirror as a testimony to its existence for those who still wish to live in that enchanting space permeated by the remembrance of the One who revealed His final message to humanity through the unlettered Prophet and preserved it for all times to come. This attempt at reconstituting the mirror has been made with consciousness of the loss as well as with the knowledge that no effort can recover all the pieces of the shattered mirror; some of its pieces have been destroyed forever, leaving behind a dim memory of their existence; others have even vanished beyond the possibility of recall; still others have turned into undifferentiated matter, like numerous houses and bazaars of Iraq and Afghanistan pulverized by B-52 bombers.

The book does not make any attempt to systematically locate the natural place for the fragments it gathers; such an exercise would be futile, not only for the obvious reason that all fragments of the mirror are not available, but also for the more important reason that one can only surmise what it would have been like to live in Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, or Istanbul before these places experienced the fatal encounter with a civilization whose very foundations represent an anti-thesis of their own constitution.

Most of the articles collected here were published in one form or another in various journals, magazines, and newspapers over

the past decade; some have been revised for the present work, while certain others have been combined to form a systematic discourse on the theme being explored. Taken together, they constitute a shattered mirror in which one can see the travails and predicaments of one fourth of humanity living one of the most violent eras of its existence. What holds these fragments of the shattered mirror together is not a magic glue of any kind but an abiding concern for the community of believers which is rapidly being destroyed by invasions and numerous direct and indirect mechanisms of control created by England, France, and the United States of America over the period of the last three centuries. These means of control and plunder of natural and human resources of Muslim lands take the form of client governments, generals and colonels installed on thrones through midnight coups, as well as more “civilized” forms of control such as the various “international” organizations which have become de facto governors of economic policies of many Muslim lands: the International Monetary Fund, the International Atomic Energy Commission, the World Trade Organization, and numerous other bodies which have emerged on the global scene during the course of the twentieth century. The “international” of these bodies simply means that their charters have been written by the former colonizers of the Muslim world and the United States of America, and client governments in the Muslim world have simply signed on the dotted line—often without understanding the full implications of their black deeds.

A vast majority of the fifty-seven Muslim states which emerged on the world scene during the two decades around the middle of the twentieth century are only marginally independent. In real terms, they are an extension of colonial rule in a disguised form; many would simply collapse without the stretchers offered them by their former colonizers and the new colonizer of the world, the United States of America. Some of these states are historical aberrations and nothing justifies their existence except the political, economic, and ideological needs of the Western powers. For example, the entire region comprising of the present-day Jordan, Syria, and Palestine was never disjointed “states”; for centuries, it was the *Bilād al-Shām*, the lands of Shām; it was only through intrigues and false documents signed by phony rulers that they turned into

individual states. Likewise, Central Asia, which was colonized by the Russians and which is now witnessing a reign of terror under the rule of former communists, was always a distinct unity within the larger Islamic system of communities. This vast region, with its fabled seats of learning at Marv, Samarqand, and Bukhara, prospered because it could draw upon the resources of lands further east, just as those eastern lands could complement the needs of their western neighbors—the Persians and Arabs.

Central Asia, Iran, and the Middle East are the battlegrounds of the twenty-first century wars, not only because of their proven oil resources, but also because they embody a belief system that is the last hurdle to the global hegemony of the Western civilization. Islam remains the only living religion that cannot accept the norms of modern Western civilization. Since there is no possibility of Reformation in Islam of the kind experienced by Christianity—as it would mean Islam’s disappearance—it will always stand in the way of Western civilization that is now bent on conquering all parts of Earth which is itself experiencing a rapid destruction of the kind and of an order that has never been witnessed in the entire history of humanity.

Tremendous battles are in the making, and though the infamous clash of civilizations is a poorly formulated concept, the clash between two opposing worldviews, ideals, beliefs, and ways of living is not a myth. It is, in fact, already in its advanced stages. *Definitive Encounters* explores various facets of this apocalyptic encounter between two opposing belief systems and those who practice them.

Waʾllāhuʾl-mustaʾn, wa mā taẓfīqī illā biʾ-Ilāh