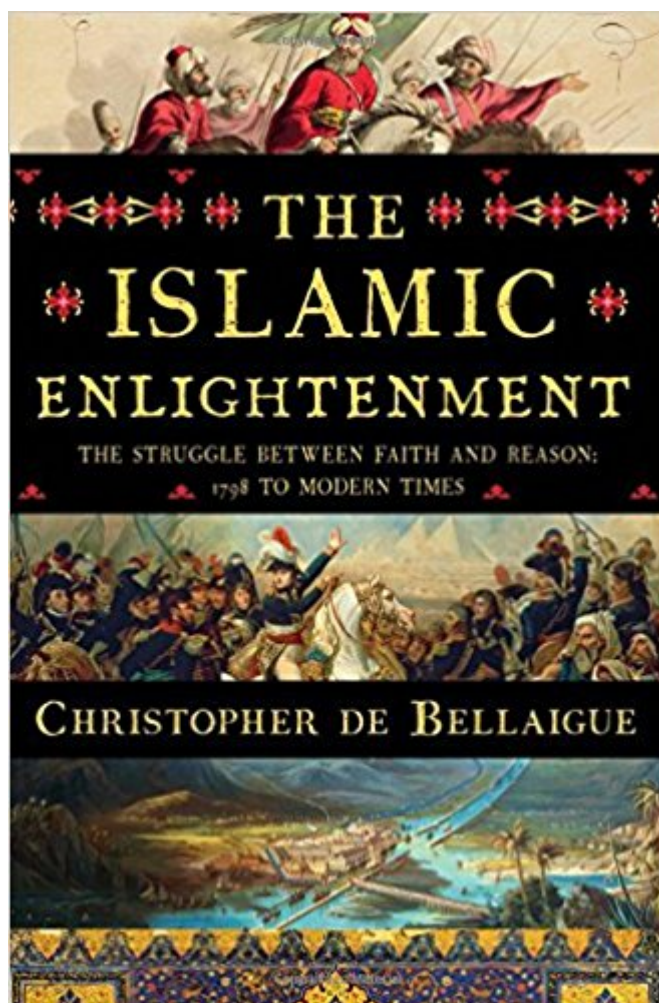


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# The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith And Reason, 1798 To Modern Times



## Synopsis

A revelatory and game-changing narrative that rewrites everything we thought we knew about the modern history of the Islamic world. With majestic prose, Christopher de Bellaigue presents an absorbing account of the political and social reformations that transformed the lands of Islam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Flying in the face of everything we thought we knew, *The Islamic Enlightenment* becomes an astonishing and revelatory history that offers a game-changing assessment of the Middle East since the Napoleonic Wars. Beginning his account in 1798, de Bellaigue demonstrates how Middle Eastern heartlands have long welcomed modern ideals and practices, including the adoption of modern medicine, the emergence of women from seclusion, and the development of democracy. With trenchant political and historical insight, de Bellaigue further shows how the violence of an infinitesimally small minority is in fact the tragic blowback from these modernizing processes. Structuring his groundbreaking history around Istanbul, Cairo, and Tehran, the three main loci of Islamic culture, de Bellaigue directly challenges ossified perceptions of a supposedly benighted Muslim world through the forgotten, and inspiring, stories of philosophers, anti-clerics, journalists, and feminists who opened up their societies to political and intellectual emancipation. His sweeping and vivid account includes remarkable men and women from across the Muslim world, including Ibrahim Sinasi, who brought newspapers to Istanbul; Mirza Saleh Shirzi, whose Persian memoirs describe how the Turkish harems were finally shuttered; and Qurrat al-Ayn, an Iranian noble woman, who defied her husband to become a charismatic prophet. What makes *The Islamic Enlightenment* particularly germane is that non-Muslim pundits in the post-9/11 era have repeatedly called for Islam to subject itself to the transformations that the West has already achieved since the Enlightenment—the absurd implication being that if Muslims do not stop reading or following the tenets of the Qur'an and other holy books, they will never emerge from a benighted state of backwardness. The Islamic Enlightenment, with its revolutionary argument, completely refutes this view and, in the process, reveals the folly of Westerners demanding modernity from those whose lives are already drenched in it. 8 pages of color and 8 pages of black-and-white illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Elegantly written”<sup>TM</sup> “The Islamic Enlightenment”<sup>TM</sup> introduces us to a fascinating gallery of individuals who would grapple with reform and modernization in theory and practice. In tracking the sinews of enlightenment through the last two centuries of Islamic thinking, this brilliant and lively history deserves nothing but praise. • - New York Times Book Review

“Excellent” | Mr. de Bellaigue, the finest Orientalist of his generation, does the world a great service by charting the attainments of the region’s long 19th century. Focusing on Iran, Turkey and Egypt, “the three intellectual and political centres of the Middle East,” Mr. de Bellaigue tells a story that is at once new, fascinating and extraordinarily important. • - Bartle Bull, Wall Street Journal

“A stylishly written, surprisingly moving chronicle of intellectual and political flourishing in Egypt, Turkey, and Iran — the brain of Islam — in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. • - Harper’s

“Deeply researched . . . . Beginning with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and ending with the late 20th century, De Bellaigue shows how the cultural struggles between modernity and tradition unfolded in Istanbul, Cairo, and Tehran. . . . De Bellaigue is a knowledgeable guide through huge sweeps of cultural history” • - Nick Romeo, Christian Science Monitor

“The book reads at times like a thriller — it is a tale of reform and reaction, innovation and betrayal, a struggle, as the author would put it, between faith and reason. . . . With such divisive views elevated to state policy, a book that examines the Islamic world’s liberalization process — at least until the French and the English carved up the Middle East after 1918 — is welcome. • - Francis Ghiles, Arab Weekly

“A highly original and informative survey of the clashes between Islam and modernity in Istanbul, Cairo, and Tehran in the last two hundred years. Brilliant!” • - Orhan Pamuk, author of My Name Is Red

“An eye-opening, well-written and very timely book, which can help us understand better the complex relationship between the Muslim world and modernity. While both Islamic extremists and Western bigots find it convenient to stress the incompatibility of Islam and modernity, Christopher de Bellaigue shows that Islam is whatever Muslims make of it, and that at least some

Muslims have made of it something very modern.â • - Yuval Harari, author of Homo Deusâ œThat there has been an Islamic Enlightenment at all will come as news to many. De Bellaigueâ™s account of the â^very broad churchâ™ of Islam in the modern world is splendid and timely.â • - Anthony Gottlieb,â author of The Dream of Enlightenmentâ œChristopher de Bellaigue has long been one of our most resourceful and stimulating interpreters of realities veiled by fear and prejudice. In The Islamic Enlightenment, he cuts through the complacent opposition of Islam-versus-modernity to reveal a fascinating world: one in which complex human beings constantly change, improvise, and adjust under the pressures of history. It is the best sort of book for our disordered days: timely, urgent, and illuminating.â • - Pankaj Mishra, author of From the Ruins of Empireâ œA brilliantly learned and entertaining study of a topic that is of far more than merely antiquarian interest: the encounter between the Islamic world and the post-Enlightenment West.â • - Tom Holland, author of In the Shadow of the Swordâ œIn this expansive historical account and commentary, de Bellaigue recounts Islam's "painful encounter with modernity" through the history of Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. . . . This is a text that demands attention for its splendid prose, command of an entire treasury of history, and ability to undermine the misplaced patronization of Middle Eastern Muslim nations over the last 300 years.â • - Publisher's Weeklyâ œTimely, thoughtful, and provocative.â • - Peter Frankopan, author of The Silk Roads

Christopher de Bellaigue has worked as a journalist in south Asia and the Middle East, writing for the Economist, the Guardian, and the New York Review of Books. He is the award-winning author of four books, has made several BBC television and radio documentaries, and has been a visiting fellow at the universities of Harvard and Oxford. He lives in London.

The title refers, not to the Golden Age of Islam in Middle Ages, when Europe learnt from Islam, but to the period from the early 19th century onwards, when Islam learnt from Europe. The theologians had clamped down on the Golden Age, and from then until the beginning of the 19th century Islam indeed fell far behind the West; but then Islamic societies began to modernize. In a 25-page introduction the author writes that in this later period the West has consistently stressed the backwardness of Islamic countries and has underestimated or ignored the rapid modernization of technology, institutions and culture after the response to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. De Bellaigue concentrates on this aspect, but he does not ignore the backlash against it among the conservative forces in Islam or indeed the limited effectiveness of modernization throughout the period "almost to the point of contradicting his contention that the achievements of those

countries have generally been underestimated. But it is true that, on the whole, the conservatives were able only to slow down, but not altogether to stop the pace of modernization until the 1980s when this book ends. Modernization and enlightenment are not necessarily the same thing, and I have an issue with the book's title: it seems to imply that the word "enlightenment" refers not just to the cultural developments (mostly among the educated middle class and having little or no impact on the poor), but also to the military, economic, and technological ones. You can see these latter aspects being developed by governments, like those of the Pahlavi Shahs, which are otherwise thoroughly repressive and unenlightened. In all three countries modernization began in the military area because the rulers were being defeated by foreign countries. Economic, technological, medical and educational improvements followed. There was then pressures for political and religious reform also, and these enjoyed occasional and brief periods of success before being put down by the governments, with the backing of the army and of the conservative clergy. But this is a most instructive and well-written book. The story is very well told, and also has many vivid and richly anecdotal descriptions. Readers who are already interested in the subject will know something of the key figures in the story, but we are also introduced to a host of characters including feminists, novelists and journalists - who will be new to most readers. De Bellaigue devotes many pages to some of these, and we have to assume that they are important and representative. The book concentrates on the main centres of modernization: Egypt, Turkey and Iran. (De Bellaigue does not deal with the Muslim Enlightenment in India.) The first three chapters are each devoted to one of those centres; they end respectively in 1879, 1878 and 1852. After that, De Bellaigue argues, their respective experiences were so broadly similar they should no longer be treated separately in the remaining three chapters. That, however, makes those chapters harder to read, and I think it would have been better to continue to treat the three countries separately until the end of De Bellaigue's chosen period in the 1980s. Although there are references to events right up to the present, De Bellaigue argues that since the 1980s transnational forces like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have taken centre stage, and that is why it no longer made sense to him to follow the story of his chosen national centres. These extremists have become a formidable threat to everything that might be called Islamic Enlightenment. They have come to such prominence that the millions of Muslims who continue to believe in progress and peaceful coexistence tend to be forgotten.

This is a superbly researched book on a topic of vital importance. Although de Bellaigue is a journalist, he clearly has the scholarly expertise and rigor of a devoted academician, and his writing

is rich, fluid and at times beautiful. He has spend time covering the Middle East and has a fondness for Islamic culture. He explicitly and forcefully rejects the views of those pundits of the west who claim that adherence to core Islamic beliefs is holding Muslims back from the sweep of modernity. He even claims there has been an Islamic "Enlightenment" after Napoleon conquered Cairo in 1798, an Enlightenment that flowered in Cairo, Tehran and Istambul. But it is here that de Bellaigue is unpersuasive. True, there have been pockets of free thinkers, women who removed the headdress, cultural critics who started western-style newspapers, businessmen (yes, almost all men) and politicians eager to embrace western ideals, mores and so forth in these three cities, again and again these progressive efforts are thwarted and crushed. de Bellaigue gives little compelling evidence of a kind of successful Islamic revolutionary and persistent "Enlightenment" of the sort that flowered in 18th-century France and which slowly but inexorably spread across the west, including of course to the "New World." So by all means read this book. But if you're hoping or expecting to be persuaded that the western pundits and scholars (and some brave Muslim scholars and thinkers) are mistaken that Islamic thought is holding back progress... well... your hopes will be unfulfilled. Read this book along with Bernard Lewis' powerful "What went wrong?: The clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East," which though shorter is more clear headed and hence persuasive.

For those who thought the Middle East was firmly stuck in the Middle Ages until their world came crashing down at the end of the Great War, this book will be a revelation. To those who knew about the Nahda, the Tanzimat and many of the other efforts at reform, it is still enlightening to know many of the people (beyond sultans and dictators) who spurred these social, political and economic efforts despite strong (and at times successful) opposition. The key word in the title is "struggle," and de Bellaigue makes that struggle clear. Very worthwhile.

once again we learn how religeous fanatisism run amok blocks real progress in society.

No problems. Have not read it yet though.

Excellent coverage of Islamic history. Enjoyed reading it.

Amazing author! Well written, very enlightening.

I am still reading it and also learning a lot of new words.

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