

# The colours of Allah

Edward Mortimer welcomes an attempt to paint a picture of the Muslim world

## Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalisation

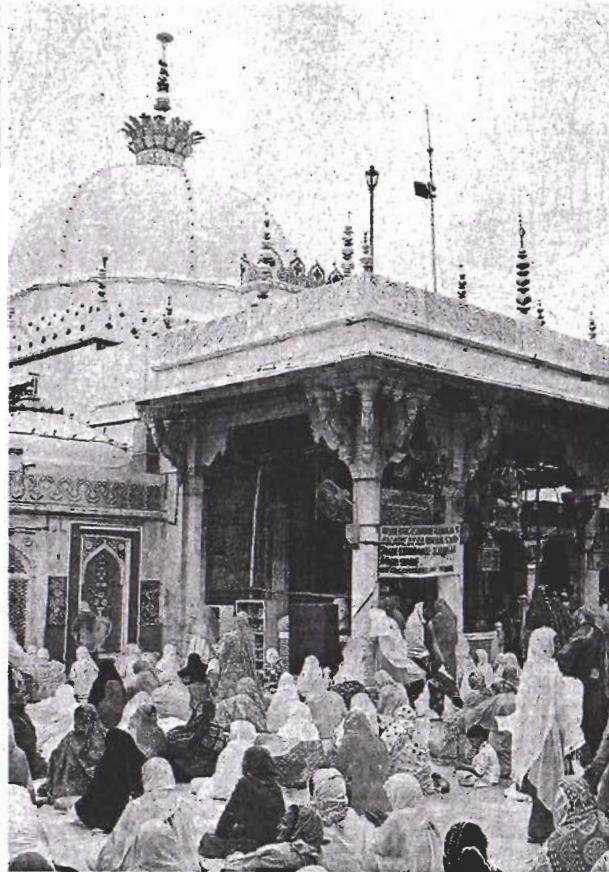
by Akbar Ahmed  
323pp, Brookings Institution Press, £17.99

Once upon a time, in the mid-1980s, a young Pakistani civil servant wanted to carry on the best traditions of the British-created Indian Civil Service. He was a devout but thoroughly modern-minded Muslim and a fervent admirer of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

Like many of his British predecessors, Akbar Ahmed combined his role as the government's political agent in a remote hill district with anthropological fieldwork, seeking to analyse and understand the unruly tribesmen whom his day job required him to pacify and subdue. A little pretentiously perhaps, he called the resulting book *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society*. I remember being slightly disappointed, when I first came across it, to find that it dealt almost exclusively with the manners and customs of one particular Pukhtun tribe, which could hardly claim to be representative of the worldwide Muslim community.

Yet, as it turns out, young Ahmed was in the right place. The province where he was stationed was South Waziristan, the wild area on the Afghan border where Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants are now believed to be hiding out. It may not be representative of the Islamic world as a whole, but it does represent an aspect of it that is now playing a larger role in world history than almost anyone could have predicted 30 years ago. So in this new book the mature Ahmed can shake his head sadly over the clumsy handling of the Pukhtun tribes by both US and Pakistani governments. Commenting on "Operation Mountain Storm", the joint operation aimed at flushing out Bin Laden and the remnants of the Taliban in the spring of 2004, he is able to remark – patronisingly perhaps, but pardonably so – that "neither the Americans nor city-dwelling Pakistanis like Musharraf and his generals appeared to have done their homework".

But the theme of Ahmed's *Journey into Islam* is much broader. In part, it is an account of a literal journey – an "anthropological excursion" – that Ahmed, now a professor at the American University in Washington, undertook in various countries (Turkey, Qatar, Syria,



Inner calm ... the Sufi shrine at Ajmer

Jordan, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia) in 2005-06, accompanied by two of his non-Muslim American students (one male, one female) and one female Arab-American Muslim research assistant. Yet it is not a travel book in any conventional sense. Particular episodes are vividly described – some by Ahmed himself, some by other members of the team – but not as part of a continuous narrative. Rather, they are woven into a sustained and passionate argument, which by the end becomes an almost desperate plea for better mutual understanding between the west and the Islamic world.

Inevitably, the phrase "clash of civilisations" appears. Indeed, it appears as a chapter heading, though followed by a question mark – as it was in its first incarnation as the title of Samuel P. Huntington's famous *Foreign Affairs*

article in 1993. Needless to say, Ahmed, who is proud to be both Muslim and western, is anxious to avert this clash as far as possible. Yet to a surprising extent he accepts Huntington's premise that Islam and the west are still distinct civilisations. Only once does he abandon this construct and refer to "a world civilisation", in which "people are now too close to and dependent on each other to afford the luxury of ignoring and excluding others". The rest of the time he treats western and Muslim cultures as discrete entities, which need to be brought closer together.

With that in view, his argument is carefully addressed to "both sides", in terms that sometimes seem to imply not only moral equivalence between western and Muslim societies but the equal complicity of both in particular acts of violence, such as "the shooting

of an entire Haditha family [in Iraq] by American soldiers and the beheading of Nick Berg in Iraq and of Daniel Pearl in Pakistan". This is slippery terrain, and Ahmed must expect some angry reactions. But he is used to that, and will take comfort from his success in establishing friendly relations with people ranging from, on one side, Judea Pearl (Daniel's father) to, on the other, Aijaz Qasmi, whose chilling words, "the actions of Osama bin Laden, Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Taliban, even if they kill women and children, are perfectly justified in Islam", he uses to open the book.

"But hold on," you are probably thinking, "what kind of symmetry is that? Judea Pearl is obviously a man of peace, and willing to strive for understanding and reconciliation even with the faith and culture that produced his son's murderers, while Qasmi is going around inciting Muslims to more indiscriminate violence." Yes, but Qasmi turns out to be the ace up Ahmed's sleeve. By the end of the book he has become general secretary of an Islamic peace foundation, an enthusiastic supporter of Ahmed's irenic message, and thus a showcase for the healing power of dialogue, "at last able to put a human face to what he had earlier called 'American barbarians'".

So the journey turns out to be not only a voyage of discovery, but also a kind of mission. The American students are brought along not only so that they can learn about Muslim attitudes at first hand, but also so that the Muslims they meet will see a different face of the west: "These Americans were actually listening to [Qasmi's] opinions and willing to discuss them seriously, in contrast to the stereotypical media commentators who labelled people like him 'Islamic extremists' without any engagement or acknowledgment of their common humanity."

And this analysis is borne out by the answers Muslims give when asked to name the most important problem facing Islam. "The expected answers – Israel, the plight of the Palestinians, the situation in Iraq – were all overshadowed by the idea that Islam was being maligned in the west."

The main purpose of the book, therefore, is to give western readers a more three-dimensional picture of the Islamic world, enabling them to engage with real-life Muslims and acknowledge "their common humanity". Ahmed's device for doing this is to introduce us to three "models" of contemporary Islam, which he associates with three rival centres – all in India, as it happens – that he and his team visit.

Aligarh, seat of the university founded on the Oxbridge model by the

great 19th-century Muslim reformer in British-ruled India, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, stands for strengthening Islam by learning from the west. Deoband, a major madrasa in India, also founded in reaction to Islam's 19th-century crisis, stands for an almost opposite philosophy, one of asserting mainstream or orthodox beliefs and traditions. (Ahmed more or less equates this with the austere Wahhabi trend promoted by Saudi Arabia.) And finally Ajmer, shrine of the 12th-century Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti, stands for a more quietist, mystical Islam, stressing inner calm, transcendence of earthly passion through direct apprehension of the divine, and openness to other forms of spirituality such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Again and again Ahmed confronts the crisis of the Aligarh model on which he himself was brought up. Its leaders seem to have lost all conviction, or become little more than corrupt dictators manoeuvring, sometimes adroitly, between American power and an ever more stridently anti-American public opinion. At Aligarh itself his American companions find the students insecure, defensive and unfriendly, whereas at Deoband, once they break through an initial barrier of suspicion and reserve, they find great courtesy, hospitality and willingness to engage in dialogue. Their host and guide at Deoband is in fact the fire-breathing Aijaz Qasmi, who later morphs into an advocate of peace and a respectful Ahmed disciple.

Crudely summarised, Ahmed's message to western leaders is to rely less on Aligarh products like his younger self, and to engage in more direct dialogue with the Deobandis – those in the Muslim world who at first sight seem most fanatically hostile. (No doubt, if asked, he would also have advised the UK government not to fan an almost-extinct controversy back into flames by giving a knighthood to Salman Rushdie.) But on the personal level he discovers a mystic streak within himself and a strong affinity with the Ajmer model. In the end, his advice to Muslims is to seek a synthesis of all three: "The accepting nature of the Ajmer model must be buttressed by the commitment and fervour that Deoband can provide, along with the skill and dexterity to negotiate with governments, organisations and political parties that is characteristic of Aligarh." Perhaps his next book should be a *Journey into the West*, on which his fellow travellers will be students from the Islamic world.

Edward Mortimer is senior vice-president and chief programme officer of the Salzburg Seminar, and author of *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam*. To order *Journey into Islam* for £16.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875.