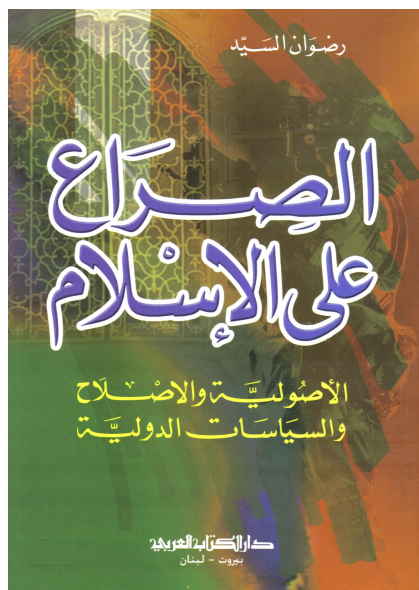




Ridwan al-Sayyid

The Struggle for Islam



The Islamic world urgently needs reform initiatives, says the Lebanese scholar of Islam Ridwan al-Sayyid. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz has read al-Sayyid's latest book "The Struggle for Islam" and says it should also be studied in the West

The Muslim world must open up to the modern world, according to the Lebanese scholar Ridwan al-Sayyid. The time has come to get rid of two illusions, according to the Lebanese writer Ridwan al-Sayyid in his book "The struggle for Islam" which was published in Lebanon in Arabic in 2004.

The first illusion is that it is at all possible to use Islam as a ruling system. The second illusion is that it is possible to separate Islam from the politically and socially influential circles in the Arab and Islamic world.

With these two illusions, al-Sayyid, a scholar of Islam who gained his doctorate at the University of Tübingen in Germany, illustrates what has become a classic blockage in the system: religion cannot be used for the benefit of the existing system on the one hand, while on the other the ruling classes cannot be separated from religion in the way that church and state have been separated in the West.

The West is to blame

In his latest book, al-Sayyid describes the current debate on Islam and considers what the way out of the dilemma might be. To start with he takes a critical look at the dominant ways of thinking in Islam today.

There are three main tendencies, he says. The first is the tendency to self-justification. Muslims seek the reasons for the current struggle between Islam and the West in a long history which starts with the Crusades, continues via colonialism and ends up with globalisation. Western civilisation is aggressive. Its nature is dominated by a narrow striving for material goods. One of the reasons for that is that "it's dominated by three Jewish trends: freemasonry, Marxism and Freudianism."

Muslims have reacted to this tendency with the Jihad movement, which, since 1800, has primarily been directed against colonialism. At the same time, the Jihad movement waged a spiritual war against domination by foreign influences and thus remained true to the cause of Islamic culture.

Interrelation between East and West

Those who represent the second of al-Sayyid's three tendencies see the disparate conditions of the Muslim and the non-Muslim world as being interrelated. They see a unipolar system with the West at its centre as having been built up during the Cold War.

They do not agree with the Islamists that it was a religious conflict but consider it to have been a conflict over resources and spheres of influence. According to this view, globalisation and the unipolar system have become the main factor in international tension. That has had as one of its consequences the worsening of relations between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world. In addition, the current organisation of the Muslim world has been a hindrance, with unrepresentative and undemocratic societies dominating the picture. Despotism has no interest in free discussion.

Deficiencies in Muslim governments

Those who follow the third tendency believe that the problems between Islam and the West have political and economic causes. The Muslim answer however is predominantly cultural. They see their problems—for example, Palestine, or civil war, or the unrest of Muslim minorities throughout the world—as unique. They observe increasing hatred of the Muslim religion in the West.

Such developments as the fatwa against the writer Salman Rushdie, or the ideological theories of the end of history or the clash of civilisations only strengthen this impression. According to al-Sayyid, representatives of this tendency recognise the deficiencies of the Muslim governments but tend to speak of a crisis in the way the rest of the world sees them.

No patent recipes

This summary of al-Sayyid's argument shows how difficult the topic is. The terms are complex and there are many and various ways of explaining the past and the present. If one considers the conclusions of his book, it becomes clear that he too doesn't have any patent recipes. He observes a "growing wave of hatred against Islam in America and Europe."

He quotes his colleague Tariq Ali saying that there's a deep conviction in America and Europe that Islam cannot be reconciled at its core with Western values and culture. This makes the integration of Muslims in the West almost impossible. All the same, Ridwan al-Sayyid wants to emphasise three points in the struggle for Islam: Islamic fundamentalism has made terror into a worldwide problem. The Muslim world has to open itself to modernity. The West dominates the world and there's an energetic struggle between the West and the other regions in which values play a central role.

His conclusion: the Muslim regions of the world need to take the initiative for wide ranging reform. This book reveals much about the debates which are going on in the Arab Islamic world, and it deserves study in the West.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Ridwan as-Sayyid: *As-Sira'a 'ala al-Islam. Al-Usuliyya wa al-Islah wa as-Siyasa ad-Duwaliyya* (The Struggle for Islam: Fundamentalism, Reform and International Politics). Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi 2004, 277 pages, ISBN 9953272662

Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz studied Arabic and economics in Leipzig. He currently researches and teaches the history and politics of German and American relations with the Middle East as well as the comparative regional history of the US, the Middle East and Europe.

Translation from German: Michael Lawton