



Library podcast

Christopher de Bellaigue discusses *The Islamic Enlightenment*

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[00:00:36] I'm Stesha Brandon I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the Central Library and to tonight's event with Christopher de Bellaigue. I would like to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and the Seattle Times for their generous support for library program. We're also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts from the foundation from thousands of donors help the library to provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in the community. So thank you to all of the wonderful folks who have helped make tonight's program possible.

[00:01:10] Now it's my pleasure to introduce tonight's speaker 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's the award winning author of four books and has made several BBC television and radio documentaries as well as being a visiting fellow at the Universities of Harvard and Oxford. He's here tonight to discuss his newest book *The Islamic enlightenment the struggle between faith and reason 1798 to modern times* double eggs book gives an account of the political and social reformation that transformed the lands of Islam in their 19th and early 20th centuries. It's a groundbreaking history of the political and social reformation of Islam across the Muslim world. Please help me welcome Christopher to the leg. As. I'd like to begin by thanking the Seattle Public Library and. All of you

[00:02:11] For making this evening possible today. He's been my first ever trip to Seattle. And I regret to say when I arrived I had to ask my strangely charming and competent escort what state I was in

[00:02:27] But I got to my game and we've spent the whole day going around your beautiful city. We've seen a mountain that apparently you never get to see because it's always raining. And we've eaten extremely well and I've even got a bit of a tan so I'm not complaining at all. So I'm very pleased to be here for that rather superficial reason and then I'm here. I'm very pleased to be here for the meat of the affair which is to try and introduce. The story that I tell in the book that is behind me and I will take you back a little. I will try and explain why I wrote this book and perhaps I should start with

the title because the idea of an Islamic enlightenment is something that for many people in the West. Is an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms. For many people the idea of that an enlightenment should even happen in the Muslim world is somehow an Orientalist approach and that we shouldn't even be expecting such a thing to happen. I believe that. What the events and the characters that I describe in the book and the incidents that I will.

[00:03:49] Go on to summarize for you tonight constitutes something along the lines of an Enlightenment and by enlightenment I do not mean that extraordinary flowering of Islamic culture politics and art in the medieval period. But we all know so much about in which we know contributed in large measure to our own Western culture and our own understanding of the world. I'm talking about that period in modern history when it has become the consensus the scholarly consensus or perhaps not the scholarly consensus but the popular and political consensus to describe as a period of stagnation of immobility and of implacable resistance to change. And I am speaking about the 19th and early 20th centuries now and then I will go on to talk about the subsequent period we see this across our political discourse now it has been axiomatic I think really since Bernard Lewis first started talking about the clash between civilizations as that was in 1957 when he coined the phrase which went on to become the clash of civilizations in the hands of Samuel Huntington.

[00:05:05] This idea that the lands of Islam are stuck in the past resistant to us and our ideas and their resistance to universal ideas that they should jolly well accept. Well let's go back to 1798 which is the beginning of my story. And I won't apologize for choosing a stunning set piece. Because after all I am not an academic or a scholar I am a popular author and this stunning set piece is the battle of the pyramids when Napoleon

[00:05:43] Leading the Army of the most self-conscious early modern nation in the world takes on the man looks outside Cairo his idea of course was to inculcate revolutionary and modern ideals to the benighted peoples of Egypt and then move on to India which was his eventual destination. So he hoped and that battle was over in a few hours. Twenty nine French dead to more than a thousand Egyptians and the leading Egyptian chronicler of the day was a sheikh called Abdul Rahman Jabar te wrote of the extreme shame and horror that he had witnessed such a site. Because the military

[00:06:35] Defeat was a portent.

[00:06:38] It was a portent that the lands of Islam and particularly in this case Egypt were under immediate and dire threat now Napoleon brought with him his salvo or his wise men in the manner of Alexander the Great. And he did so in order to show off the achievements of revolutionary France. And so there was a remarkable meeting because the sheiks of Egypt of the school of Al Azhar one of the greatest generators of ideas across the Muslim world were in a position of a monopoly a monopoly of knowledge and it is to the it is to the holders of that monopoly that Napoleon wished to show off so he brought the sheiks to the palace that he had expropriated for his wise men and the sheiks arrived and they were given their first experience of electricity and they were shown a marvelously engraved portrait of the Prophet Mohammed as envisaged in the mind of a French artist and they were shown in subsequent days hot air balloons rising up into the sky. And they learnt about

modern modern forms of gunpowder and modern ideas about artillery. And they'd already seen the French in their modern uniforms with their modern equipment taking apart the modern economy. And they would. They were filled. With a combination of dread fear horror and for some excitement I start this book. I'm now in one of these parents sceptical movements that you'll find I take every now and then I start this book with Jane Eyre. Why do I start with Jane Eyre. Well that's because you will know Jane.

[00:08:24] And it's an easy way in. But why would I start with Jane Eyre. Well I started with Jane Eyre because I read Jane Eyre I regret to say for the first time as I was starting to write this book. And this story of a of a young English woman of. Good education limited means involved as a teacher in a girls school in England in around 1820. That's roughly the time when we think China was set. Was a kind of was a story of a girl taking her life into her own hands. And so how did she how did she do this. She decides she wants a new situation. And to get the new situation she is going to put an advertisement in the newspaper the advertisement will be answered by someone who replies to the post office. She will then get on a Can four wheeled conveyance that will take her across England along one of the new turnpike roads and she will arrive at her new situation meet her employer and fall in love with him and make her life. She will do all of this without censure from a society that acknowledges her sovereign right and her sovereign ability to take decisions without asking the permission of a father or a brother and she can cross the country without risk to her reputation. And it struck me to ask as I was. Deep in this research about the Islamic Enlightenment what the worlds of Islam would have made of Jane and

[00:09:59] The fictional character the concept the idea there was no newspaper there was no educated women there was no school for women there was no post office. There was no paved road between the towns. The only four wheeled conveyance

[00:10:19] Was owned by the king or the Viceroy or some other big wig. And so the idea and then the idea of Jaina behaving so autonomously. Well if you put all of those elements together and present them to the Islamic world or most of the Islamic world in 1798 or 1820 when the book was set well it's almost deranged in its impossibility it is completely off the scale and then I thought if you leap forward 50 years or 60 years in the Islamic world and I want now just to do a bit of housekeeping what is the Islamic world. For the purposes of my book. It is the three main catalyzing territories in the Middle East Iran Egypt and Turkey and of course. Enlightenment ideas entered elsewhere. And of course there were great examples of progress and modernity elsewhere. However I believe that these three were the most important and they had a catalyzing effect elsewhere. So this is what I mean tonight. And in this book by the Islamic enlightenment by the Islamic world having gone off into my parentheses I've not forgotten where. I need to come back to. Jayna. 50 years later. That's it. So 50 years later from the impossible. Where are we. Well we're finding Jane as coming into being in the Islamic world. We're finding women not only able to read newspapers but actually writing in the newspapers expressing their desires expressing their. Dissatisfaction dissatisfied dissatisfaction with what it could be anything from the position of women under Islamic law to the to the segregate to the position in the steamers that are crossing the Bosphorus that are assigned to women and men. Why do men go at the front. It's time that we got our place at the front. Women are going to the from the

Islamic world from Istanbul are being invited to the World Fair in Chicago in 18 1890. 1893. I think you're right. So and we're finding we're finding women involved in the new art form of the novel. We're finding women beginning to challenge all sorts of strictures about dress.

[00:12:49] And so how did this happen it struck me that how did that in in the space of 50 or 60 years. How did this happen. I wouldn't claim to you that these Jane as we're in a majority or even that there were very many of them they were a vanguard formed of the upper class the educated upper class of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. However their example was extremely strong as I hope to demonstrate.

[00:13:14] So that 50 years struck me as a hugely important moment because all of these technologies had also come into being newspaper post-office steamer four wheeled conveyance. All of that was now under way. And so I want to take you now back to that first Egyptian encounter and to follow with you some of the other changes that take us up to the end of the 19th century in which I believe constitute a veritable Islamic Enlightenment so the modernization or enlightenment. Process was pushed forward

[00:13:55] By some of these sheiks so remote. I spoke to you about who who met the savant of Napoleon but also people like them across. The Turkish and the Iranian worlds. It was often that the clerics because they had the monopoly on power on intellectual power and knowledge who led the process but their work they had an important accomplice and that was the authoritarian modernizing Prince and without them there wouldn't have been the Islamic enlightenment or it would have taken a very different form. They were authoritarians. They were martinet and they got things done very quickly and often in the face of much opposition. So Mohammad Ali who was the Pasha the leading Pasha of Egypt for much of this. For much of the first half of the 19th century was part of this process one of the first things he did was to concert was to confiscate a vast amounts of clerical land. And so that completely transformed the nature of land ownership in Egypt one of the other things he did. Was to start building a modern military and if we're looking at modernization if we're looking at the Enlightenment process in the Middle East we have to acknowledge that it starts with the military because the military are going to protect you from further invasion because of course the French didn't stay for very long in Egypt they left pretty soon afterwards but still that experience of occupation by the Christian power or even worth the rational non believing power had left a very nasty taste in the mouth. So what are we gonna do we got to build up our military.

[00:15:35] How are we going to do that. Are we going to get our men to March 4 abreast. Have they got to turn up on time for a battle. Do they just roll in whenever they want to they bring their own horses or do we have to have a commissariat. Do we actually have to start thinking about standardizing weaponry. What do we need to teach them in terms of artillery how much mathematical knowledge does that require. Are we going to have to get them to shave their beards Well that seems like a very trivial thing but it isn't a tool because if you don't shave your beard you will finish your beard very badly from the gunpowder. As the Iranians discovered as they started to modernize their army. So the answer is yes you're going to shave off the beard you're going to put people in Western uniforms you're going to get them marching four abreast and there will be opposition there'll be

opposition from clerics there will be popular opposition as well but the authoritarian modernizers were determined and they pushed things through. And we have the first instance in the middle of the 19th century of a Middle East an Islamic army. Fighting according to western precepts and principles but when you open the door to ideas of modernity it's very difficult to save them and to decide what gets in and what doesn't get in and so of course along with all these ideas that were strictly instrumental they were all about saving the Islamic world from the encroachments of the West.

[00:17:08] You get all sorts of other things now. One good example is theatres of anatomy medicine in the Islamic world

[00:17:20] Had stayed very much behind the West and one of the reasons according to Sheikh Hassan Al Athar who is one of the sheikhs who went to meet the French when they arrived and who was greatly influenced by what he saw. So influence that he travelled and then came back and became the leading clerical authority in the moment early regime. His idea was. Well you've got to modernize medicine. And he'd seen evidence of people dying unnecessarily. And he was foursquare behind the idea of dissection and anatomy lessons. But of course the prophet says that you cannot cut up a dead body and it is widely believed by the populace at large that cutting up a dead body will the dead body feels every incision but what shape how lighthearted in tandem with Muhammad Ali the sheik produced an Islamic reason for justifying it and then the the anatomy class the first anatomy class was set up. Of course it was seminarians it was Islamic students who were who formed the body of the students because they were in control of the whole mechanism of learning but they didn't tell people outside this first of this first feature of anatomy what was going on inside. In fact they posted guards. But gradually. The idea of anatomy the idea of. Observation within medicine takes hold and you find

[00:18:59] You find the Turkish Sultan Mahmoud the second reading a copy of a book written in Turkish by a Turk drawn from the observations of a doctor in Vienna. And it is full of scratched out of engravings that have been that have been painstakingly reproduced within this book.

[00:19:20] And for many people would have constituted a kind of heretical action. But you find the sultan reading that and devouring it and deciding that this needed to happen. And so gradually you find that in this book behind me there is a wonderful wonderful. Photograph that I believe repays the cost of purchase.

[00:19:44] And that is a photograph of in the eighteen fifties of a medical school in Istanbul this is only the eighteen fifties Fifty years after the modernization process started in earnest. And that's sitting there in a lovely group photograph very smart in their tablets and their faces very serious.

[00:20:03] Hold on around them are human limbs skulls legs knees arranged in a kind of grotesque tableau. And this is. This is the heart of the Ottoman Empire. This is the capital of the caliphate. And so in this way attitudes start to be challenged in some ways. In some instances extremely brusquely extremely rudely other things started to happen and a lot of them happened because. People went abroad the idea of going abroad and coming back with ideas from the West was starting to take root

and I know that what I am saying will sound to you as if everything in the Islamic Enlightenment happened

[00:20:49] Because of a Western impulse provocation trigger. And indeed I do think that the main trigger to the processes that I'm describing today did come from the West. However there was much in what people discovered in Western ideas. They found that they already had possessed it within the framework of the Islamic tradition. And I'll mention that I'll make mention that later on. But the idea of going abroad and coming back with ideas was starting to take root. So there's a wonderful character called called Silas Shirazi who was an Iranian who was sent by the crown prince in 1815 or so to England along with four other Iranian students. And he did us the great. Favor of leaving behind a wonderful memoir in which he describes this journey which is not simply a geographical journey not simply a cultural journey but also very much an intellectual journey. And he we we follow him through Moscow which is being rebuilt and it is there that he hears the news of the Battle of Waterloo. He goes from there to St. Petersburg which is the first modern city that he has ever seen. And he sees this extraordinary Marvel built by Peter the Great of course at immense cost in life. And Luca. And he is absolutely astonished by the tall buildings by the bridges spanning the water by the different facilities and amenities on show. Zoos schools and from there he boards a ship which takes him to England and he spends the next four years in England on commission from his crown prince to find out what what is going on.

[00:22:34] So he learns very good English he travels he shows an immense curiosity and he begins to write the first one of the first histories of a non-Muslim country written by an Iranian.

[00:22:50] And in doing so he interrogates himself as to the conditions of life in England the economy the history and also the political conditions. And one thing completely takes his breath away. And this is when the Prince Regent wants to lay a large road between his palace and the new park that he building and all is going well until one cottage shopkeeper

[00:23:15] Says I'm not budging and the whole of London is talking about this. Amir's a solid Shearer as he cannot believe that

[00:23:24] Here is a man of the prince region's stature unable to move a simple shopkeeper. And you see at this point the germination the beginning the first inkling of the idea of the curtailment of the power of the absolute ruler because of course at this time absolutism is in absolute control. He doesn't make that absolutely clear in his in his report to the prince because he values his own position in life. But. It is starting to work. And I will go on in a few minutes to tell you how that comes to fruition elsewhere. Before I do I want to say a few other things about some hoary old Islamic practices that will never leave because because the place is so backward like slavery when in fact slavery goes incredibly quickly. It starts under pressure from the British and other European powers who have come rather late in the day to the idea that slavery is wrong. Slavery I should mention parenthetically is a rather different institution in the Islamic world. In the first place however it remains the case that it is. Depriving the an individual of his or her liberty and within a short period of time all three major

territories in the Middle East the Ottoman empire including Egypt and also Iran have banned the slave trade.

[00:24:52] By the end of the 19th century the slave the actual institution of slavery was much in abeyance. And this wasn't just because the West was beating the Muslims over the head and saying you have to ban this because it's wrong. No from the eighteen sixties we start to get writing people writing in the Muslim world about the institution of slavery finding that there isn't the justification for it in the Koran that that the that it has been held to be the case and also coming at it from a position that we would regard as as Human Rights an Iranian intellectual in the 1960s wrote it with a sense of absolute outrage at this institution and in particular the castration of eunuchs many of them very young boys outside the main slave markets in the hejab. And he writes of this in terms that we would recognize simply as those of human rights what about the plague the plague

[00:25:56] Was rampant across the Middle East in the first years of the 19th century. Two hundred years after the last major outbreak in Europe the plague remained a major threat across the Middle East 250000 people lost their lives to the plague it is estimated in Constantinople in a single year in a single season. And the French consulate Piraeus. Remonstrated with one of the sheikhs there. He said that the plague is coming. It is spreading inexorably towards us you must introduce quarantine you must think about fumigation you must think about isolating the houses of those who are affected and the sheikh said whatever God decrees we must bowed down before it and the plague duly arrived and the population was decimated. However here too we are in the debt of the authoritarian modernizers for up to a point. They served a very important purpose. They steamrolled popular popular opposition and they had important allies within the more among the more progressive clerics who said that no it was fine to introduce quarantine. And so this happened across the Middle East and within five or 10 years the plague was consigned to history. And then no one raised their voice in defense of the old practices because the new practices had been introduced. The world had not stopped turning and the populace actually quite liked it.

[00:27:29] So there was no mileage in opposing what had already happened the telescoping of technology is another thing that was hugely important.

[00:27:39] The Telegraph movable type post-office steamer and all sorts of other Western innovations were introduced very very quickly much quicker than they had been elaborated in the West. One of the other remarkable facts of this period is to draw a comparison between the alacrity with which the basset empire had welcomed in the Met in the medieval period had welcomed the introduction of Chinese paper technology and within a very short time Baghdad was full of paper factories because its application was clear and its usefulness was clear.

[00:28:20] Compare that to the four hundred year interval that elapsed between Gutenberg's movable type and its introduction to to the Muslims of the Middle East. The non Muslim Christian minorities had in fact introduced a moveable type for their for their scriptures much earlier. But there was there was strong opposition. The word of God ultimately was going to come under a Western technology or an infidel technology.

[00:28:52] And there was enormous opposition however that to the opposition suddenly fell away. And so we find in the 1820 is the first Imperial Printing Presses coming up in Egypt. We find an immense importation of intellectual geographical philosophical historical works all being translated into Arabic and later on being translated into Turkish.

[00:29:19] And after that being translated into Persian but where is the politics in all this.

[00:29:27] Whereas that absolutely linked idea that goes along with the autonomy and the education of the individual. That idea of self-determination and self-expression on the political plain. Well I mentioned that little inkling that came from me was that Sollecito was in his book which he wrote in England something similar happened in France. Rafael Tatar was one of the great reformers of Egypt made a similar discovery but it wasn't until 1876 that you find. Not the first constitution in the Islamic world because there had been a kind of crazy constitution in Tunisia but the first real constitution coming into being in the Islamic world not one that severely curtailed the Sultan's power but which nonetheless placed limits on it and also gave privileges and powers to electors to an electorate a franchise that would then go on to expand now that constitution didn't last very long.

[00:30:34] It was slapped down by the Sultan and he imposed an autocracy as a result.

[00:30:39] But those ideas that lay behind it the dissidents who'd gone abroad and fought for it outside continued to churn. And it's interesting that in the political sphere in the constitutional right and the constitution writing sphere in the sphere of the elaboration of the idea of the nation which is something else that came in very very quickly towards the end of the 19th century you find an extremely fruitful blending a blending of western political idea and also Islamic tradition.

[00:31:11] Someone like NOM a camel who is the the Turkish Victor Hugo. But he is also a constitution writer as well. He came at the Constitution and he came at the idea of the ruler consulting his people from an Islamic perspective and he found evidence in Islamic teaching free for precisely that and he tried to blend the two and the same was true in Egypt with those first moves towards constitutional rule the idea of the nation starts to come to the fore and in 1880 there is a rebellion in Egypt aimed. At reducing the power of the the Viceroy

[00:31:59] And also establishing a sovereign Egyptian parliament. This also was a false dawn and the British invaded two years later and that and that endeavor was was limited. But then we find across the region we find

[00:32:21] These little movements coming together and it's one of the extraordinary facts that really very few people in the West seem to be aware of in which they're very surprised when I tell them is that on the eve of the First World War at a time when many of us think fondly that the Islamic world was stuck there was a constitutional revolution in Iran a constitutional revolution in Turkey and very strong pro constitutional movement rising once again in Egypt and the extraordinary thing about the Constitutional Revolution of Iran for example is that it wasn't simply confined to the major urban

centers you had you found consuls from the major European power Powers writing back to their capital saying this isn't just Tehran. These are small provincial towns in the far flung corners of northern Iran that are taking the administration of that particular region into their own hands and they are forming autonomous self-governing units. This is something quite revolutionary and it's extraordinary also to think that in Tehran which we now associate with clerical rule that the leading cleric of that period because he opposed constitutionalism was hanged in public. I mean I think of that now and I just mean it's absolutely absolutely extraordinary in his son who was himself a constitutionalist stood below the jib it and said and told the hangman to get on with his job.

[00:33:59] That was the kind of division that was now being created between those who associated themselves with these progressive ideas and those who did not. It is a remarkable fact. That in the sphere of science in the sphere of. Radical ideas it was easier to discuss these ideas in turn of the 19th century in turn of the 20th century Egypt than it is today. Darwinism was. Being discussed freely books were being written about it.

[00:34:35] The chief mufti of Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century a remarkable man called Mohammed Abdul was in correspondence with Tolstoy. He visited Herbert Spencer in England and he spoke French with a Parisian accent. This was a kind of openness to the outside world that I think were part of it had to do. I mean Mohammed Abdul was accused of naivete. He was accused of worst. He was accused of betraying Islamic values but at that time there wasn't a sense that the outside world was in fact such a pernicious influence that the West. Would betray the principles that it purported to espouse Mohammad Abdu as a man who who issued fatwas. Of. Extraordinary of an extraordinary progressive nature. He was trying to redefine some of the important laws that define that that govern the living of. A Muslim in the modern world to do with dress to do with practice to do with bonding with ideas of travel of going to non-Muslim countries. And for that he was pilloried for that. Eventually his his career was destroyed. But the fact that he was there at the pinnacle of the Egyptian religious establishment at the turn of the century is a remarkable fact.

[00:36:02] And that was freethinking thinking going on it was the social novel entering. People were starting to critique the idea of modernity. It had only just arrive. But they were already criticizing it and finding in it reasons to be suspicious. The first the first inklings of industrialization were critiques in a remarkable book which I write about in my book which is a kind of flickering humid suspicious but at the same time enormously

[00:36:35] Broad criticism of modernity and how it might atomized people it might derive one from the other and also about the nature of industrialization. What it meant to work alongside and with the machine things that were we in the West are very familiar with those same issues cropping up the so we also at this time have the gene and they have become many many more numerous the educated and emancipated women some time.

[00:37:10] Well I'll go back and I'll tell you the story of the first school that was set up by a Middle Eastern state in order to educate women.

[00:37:18] It was set up by Mohammad Ali Pasha in Egypt way back in the eighteen twenties and it was a school of midwifery the school buildings were prepared. The staff were hired. The doors opened. Come on girls.

[00:37:35] No one turned up. Such was the hostility. Such was the suspicion the idea of a girl going out potentially with a profession awaiting her at the end. And so what they had to do and it's an endlessly fascinating irony of this story that the first women who were educated by the state in Egypt had been purchased from the slave market but by the time that we're talking about now at the beginning of the 20th century things have changed to such an extent that education and literacy were rising I wouldn't say at jet speed but they were rising very very steadily and. With luck to lasting effect and so around the turn of the century there is a moment which you can identify from the figures the figures for educating women which indicate that a certain point it went from being unacceptable to educate your daughter as a member of the new middle class to being unacceptable not to educate your daughter and we find the first reports

[00:38:47] Of women challenging the veil in public. The first major expression of that in fact went back earlier to Iran and a remarkable character. Again I write about her called collateral Ein who was a millenarian. She was part Joan of Arc. Part Seaman de Beauvoir and she took off her veil and it was an absolute scandal and then later on we find women coming back.

[00:39:17] Well when they got on the steamer to cross the Mediterranean of course they slipped out and got into their Parisian fashions. But we find people actually returning to Egyptian soil and not covering up again. And the scandal that that caused.

[00:39:31] And we find journalism being used to express all sorts of ideas about the place of women in society about the place of women within the nation. Because of course one of the impulses to female education was not really

[00:39:47] The uplift of women. It was the uplift of women with the aim of

[00:39:52] Educating fine young sons and that goes back to the idea of the nation coming into being so on the eve of the First World War we have a Middle East or important areas of the Middle East in a kind of vortex of change extremely debilitating extremely worrisome.

[00:40:15] But at the same time exhilarating the appearance of things have changed. Old Cairo had been it had been abandoned. A new city had been built.

[00:40:25] The Suez Canal cut from the Mediterranean in order to ship vast amounts of goods and services to the to the Far East.

[00:40:39] This was another extraordinary indication of change raising questions what did it mean and we find the crowned heads worried Abdel Hamid the second in Iran in Turkey toppled in a revolution constitutional revolution fourth through in Iran this liberal moment what happened to it. The first thing

is we have to recognize that it existed a liberal moment before the First World War the First World War happened to it. That's what happened to the First World War obliterated.

[00:41:16] The region is obliterated the political entities in the region the Ottoman Empire was destroyed not just the political entities but also famine caused by the Wheeling hither and thither of vast armies with impunity. Not really taking into account the borders that they crossed. Iran had 16 governments in the period of the First World War and the government had to move around because the Turkish army might be there one day. And then the Brits and the Germans the next and a vast vast number of people were killed. And that's not even talking about the destruction of the Armenians in Turkey and then as a result of the first world war.

[00:42:03] It was really up to the Western powers to make good on their longstanding promises. The Brits had promised. Egypt a degree of self-determination if they supported them in the war. The whole rhetoric coming from the west the whole underpinning of all of these stories of progress of emulation of enlightenment the underpinning was

[00:42:28] A political look and a narrative of political autonomy but that's not what happened. So the Middle East or most of the what had been the Ottoman Empire was carved up by the Brits. And the French

[00:42:42] And those key territories that weren't included in the carve up turkey the new nation of Turkey formed by Ataturk in 1923 and Iran Under Reza Shah went pell mell into a kind of authoritarian nationalism that may have been useful one hundred years before but now with seriously open to doubt.

[00:43:04] Why was it open to doubt. Well this again was born of. Defensiveness Ataturk and Reza Shah shared the idea that in order to escape colonization you had you had to become something along the lines of a of a fascist regime and so many of many in the West found this absolute admirable and I and I myself having been to Turkey at the tail end of the Ataturk revolution in the late 1990s when the Ataturk revolution was still very much alive. I find myself with conflicted views on this subject but one of the byproducts of telling people that they needed to dress differently of informing the Kurds that they did not in fact exist telling people that they had to learn a new alphabet such as they couldn't read their own poetry or the gravestones of their ancestors or in Iran plunging great roads and rails railway through the middle of the country a vast expanse great national projects of revival returning to the pre Islamic past creating a narrative of pre Islamic grandeur all of this came at a price

[00:44:24] And at the same time you've got the colonization of the rest of the Middle East which ended in a gradual piecemeal messy decolonization and the replacement of those colonial regimes with Arab regimes of varying degrees of authoritarianism varying degrees of a tier of political adherence to the west.

[00:44:46] Well the cost was the rise of Islamism what we now call Islamism Islamism has roots that go back further. It's been influenced by Islamic thinkers going way back into the past and Islamic activists for example in 18th century Arabia but it's initial initial ancestor initial godfather was someone called said Jamal Adina Afghani and Afghani was

[00:45:17] Born in Iran but he changed his name to Afghani because he didn't want to be associated with the Shia sect which of course Iran represented and so that he could move and move he did. He was an incredible he was he was in he was into agitprop before the phrase had even been invented he went to Turkey his quick cause trouble in Turkey by suggesting that philosophy was in some ways superior to divine revelation he went to Egypt where he was associated with the first stirrings against the caddy or the Viceroy and he was expelled he went to India it observed the rebellion or mutiny of 1857 and he'd come out with a vivid hatred of British imperialism but at the same time a desire to acquire some of the some of the material advantages of the West and at the same time a respect and a sense that the philosophical tradition was also philosophical tradition of Islam. And he did his best work in Iran where he was responsible for in part for some of the first anti-Western agitations because of course the West although it hadn't properly colonized Iran was coming in and taking privileges speculations and also being given large swathes of the Iranian economy and so on the instigation of general is enough money a an agitation was

[00:46:49] Initiated in Iran because the tobacco concession had been given to the Brits and so authoritarian with such authority did he.

[00:46:59] Did he speak that I finally got one of the major ayatollahs across the border in Iraq to issue a fatwa. It's factual when it came not only did people drop their hookah pipes and not take up and not smoke but the women of the imperial harem also laid down the hookah pipe. And so the. The Shah was obliged to capitulate anyway. This idea this Islamist idea articulated in the late 19th century by said jam out of the Enough colony became something

[00:47:34] More directed in the 20th Hassan al-Banna formed the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s as. An organization of. Muslim self-expression. And it is here that we are on the hinge moment in the whole story because it is here that you find someone who becomes a major public figure a major public intellectual a kind of guide for the whole of his country saying everything you've heard for the last century and a bit about modernization about emulating the West about learning from the West about bringing in the technology that you can't just take the roads without the thorns you've got to bring it all in bag and baggage all of that needs to be put to one side. And what we need to do is find. The ingredients for our regeneration within ourselves within Islamic culture within Islam. And so what starts as a as a vehicle for self-expression by Egyptians and by Muslims how hardens and it becomes something political it enters the political sphere and that's how the Muslim Brother hood entered the political sphere and became gradually capable

[00:48:50] Of more militant acts through the teachings primarily of say the quota who came to America and I love the contrast here. I told you about me as a solid shooter is it going to England and I could mention many others who are in the book who go to other parts of the world and come back

with a sense of admiration not a sense that everything needs to be copy. But with a sense of admiration let's say the portrait goes to America and he comes back with quite the opposite. It comes about with the idea of a degenerate immoral west and it is that that we find now today writ large very literally across parts of the Middle East. There was another form of reaction where now in the section of the book that I call the counter enlightenment which is aims to try and explain that question that we we've heard so often most notably from Bernard Lewis what went wrong. I think that what went wrong was the first world war and its aftermath. Otherwise things could have been very very different.

[00:49:59] And there was another form of reaction that I just want to outline briefly before I end my remarks. And that is so I was asked in an in an earlier talk a couple of days ago whether that was an old woman in the attic a woman in the attic in this story of the Islamic enlightenment. And I stupidly didn't really get so I said what what do you mean. And she said well what I mean is is there a casualty in this whole story because we're talking about a joyful embrace of the new. Is there a casualty. And I thought that she was absolutely right to ask that question and the casualty is of course that when you when you embrace the new it involves displacing the old and the new doesn't really take many prisoners and a lot of that is good in the old is also lost and I think this was the kind of thought that was going through the mind of another wonderful character Jalal al-Ahmad in the 1950s and 1960s and intellectual instinctively a secularist a drinker

[00:51:05] Someone who visited Israel and found much to admire and yet someone who found in Shia Islam an antidote to what he regarded as the flattening all consuming nature of popular culture then being disseminated from America and through Europe across the rest of the world. And he draws a caricature of the kind of

[00:51:32] Bureaucrat who was then working for the Shah a relentlessly modernizing Shah who was ashamed of his people who was ashamed of their practices and their religion. So this man is someone who lives in a modern air conditioned house and he doesn't take off his shoes when he comes home and puts his feet up and puts on Frank Sinatra and reads time magazine. And it's that kind of person that to Joel Jalal al-Ahmad that reassuring figure which to us seems perfectly normal was for him a great threat. And so he fell back and he said Shia Islam is the answer even even though I may not be particularly devout even though I can see through it for others it's very useful. And so that was the other what they call the nativist reaction which you also find elsewhere. This takes us really up to 1980 which is the end of my book and I stop the Islamic Revolution in Iran. I stop with the expansion of Saudi power which makes talk of three catalyzing centers really makes it moot. We're now in a much more fluid period both in terms of ideas origins of ideas and geography. And so from here it becomes a different story a story that many of you know will know much much better because it is being written exhaustively since 9/11. But what I wanted to give you was simply an idea of what came before then and that we mustn't ever forget that there was a very vivid brilliant and shining liberal moment in the Islamic world whose traces still remain so that when you see something on the news about an agitation in Iran. In favor of something or another then remember it's a very old struggle that goes all the way back to the constitutional revolution in the first years of the 20th century. So these ideas are implanted and they won't go away no matter how pessimistic one might feel about the situation. Thank you very much for listening.

[00:53:45] The question is about the Sunni Shia split and whether I think it is possible that there will be an accord between the the Saudis and the Iranians. I'd like to preface my response by saying that the sectarian ization of the Middle East is a historical event it has taken place but it wasn't inevitable and it wasn't ever. So it really started after the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran and before then we have although there have been moments of warfare moments of tension and a longstanding sense of rivalry we find long long periods of history where the two sects have got on pretty well and where the top figures on both sides have been and got involved in dialogue they've been united on other matters for example anti imperialism. But we do find this terrible division now it's an instrument rather than a fact on the ground that simply one has to live live with and writers on the subject go in they go into forensic detail just how did it how did it happen and what we're finding now in a place like Syria in Iraq in Yemen to a lesser extent but also in Yemen Lebanon.

[00:55:13] We're finding that the sectarian card has been elevated into the defining feature of the Middle East and it wasn't it wasn't. It is it is a historical it is a political manipulation that is taking place now and that is one of the.

[00:55:28] I mean it is so unutterably tragic what is happening because it's not intrinsic to the Islamic faith and it's not intrinsic to the Middle East whether it can and how it can end it can really only end if if you accept that Iran somehow represents the Shia world and if you somehow accept that Saudi Arabia has some kind of representative status then it becomes a political thing. The only the only way forward that I can see is for people at a much lower level to call a halt. But of course that that involves an end to violence. And I know that the most appalling violence is being perpetrated as we all do by Muslim upon the Muslim of course.

[00:56:13] Isis is major enemy is not the West. ISIS is major enemy is the Shias and the Shias have responded. And the Iranians do not take this sort of thing lying down. So what we're finding in Syria in particular is an intensification. So I'm not I'm not optimistic in the short term I'm afraid.

[00:56:34] The question is the extent to which the Islamic world could draw on its own heritage when trying to reform and come to terms with the challenges of the modern world. And I think a great deal of thought went into that. In some cases by the characters in my book. And I think in trying to reach back many of them found that the early days of Islam had been a day had been days of pristine renewal and of a purity not simply a religious purity but also a moral and political purity. And they found in the example of the prophet and in some cases his successors a model really of justice that could just easily be transplanted to the modern world and set an example of consultation between ruler and ruled that could just as easily be transplanted to the modern world. And so they found justifications from an Islamic. Perspective for all sorts of things that we may consider entirely and inherently Western.

[00:57:48] Did they believe that.

[00:57:50] Well I think many of them did and they had good textual reason to do so. However it was also important public relations because if you're trying to insist to people that they accept that something that comes from the outside particularly if they belong to a Muslim faith. That they've always been taught and led to believe was here to supplement not to supplement Christianity or Judaism but to supersede them then you have to give them a convincing story and so that convincing story was it looks as though it's coming from the West.

[00:58:23] But in fact a lot of it is within us. And then if you go to other things you go to. The sheikh I mentioned who was in Egypt Sheikh later. He went back and he found in his in his attempts to bring medicine into the modern world he found many examples of innovation and

[00:58:47] Discoveries in the medical world. To go back to the Islamic past that were now being presented as Western as Western discoveries and the most often oft cited of these is the pulmonary operation of the heart that William Harvey is widely supposed and thought to have discovered and elaborated will in fact the Syrian know Nafis came to a similar conclusion for centuries before.

[00:59:20] So there is that sense of you being able to draw on achievements in the past. However it's a very difficult line to draw. And I think one of the problems and one of the things that made the rise of Islam that isn't Islamism that much easier was that sense that my God for 120 years all we've been doing is just taking taking accepting accepting accepting and now someone has an abundant standing up and saying no we've got it all within us we can do everything but simply by. The key is to find a pure Islamic way of doing things.

[00:59:57] So that partly accounts for the attraction that that theory exerts huge out. How did I go about writing the book and what are the things that I that that still confused me about about the question What could I not answer the writing of this book in some ways goes back to the beginning of my career as a journalist when I worked in many places in the developing world many of them Muslim and I was constantly being told. By

[01:00:30] Generally Western is that I spoke to in positions of maybe they'd be diplomats or officials from the World Bank I'd go and talk to them and at the end they'd say you know the problem problem about Country X or country Y is that Islam has never had an enlightenment. And so for this reason we can see that human rights have not evolved here or that there's an enormous amount of corruption or that there's no real health and safety in the factories and so much of this. Seems like it's all because they didn't have an enlightenment. So I thought that sounds a bit odd. Let's try and work out what an enlightenment means and whether or not they did have an enlightenment. So that was the that was the initial motivation and

[01:01:14] The whole background for this story comes from my my career in the region. But I actually wrote the book in a library in London the British Library which incidentally is where some of the characters in the book. Actually consulted books back in the 19th century. So it was a it was a sedentary job. I used Persian and Turkish sources but I used also a great many secondary sources written in European languages a lot has been written on this subject what no one has done to date I

think is to put it together and present it in a in a kind of popularly accessible form all and no one has had the the the foolishness to leap into the hornet's nest and say yes there was an Islamic Enlightenment because of course everyone has spent so much time saying there never has been one of the questions that still remain in my mind

[01:02:12] I think that pertains to the future they pertain to the future of these ideas they seem to be in abeyance now in many cases although of course in my own country here we find Muslims living in perfect accord with enlightenment values although they may adapt them adopt them in different ways modify them.

[01:02:35] But I think that the future is is is the question that I really can't I can't. I find it difficult to hazard a guess because the region is in so much turmoil that one fears for the the the fragility of these ideas we as we saw in the Arab Spring as we saw in Iran with the Green Movement in 2009 as we saw with the process in Turkey by narrow margins all of these hopeful movements have been snuffed out. So we'll have to we'll have to wait and see. The question is about the status of the women that I

[01:03:11] Celebrated in the form of the Janus rising to the surface and what is their status now. I was in Egypt shortly after the Arab Spring during a piece on education and women's education still leaves a great deal to be desired. There are more women in tertiary education in Iran than men. That's surprising. Turkey women's education is extremely good of course.

[01:03:39] Women's education doesn't necessarily lead to a life of autonomy. A lot of the women come out of university in Iran with excellent degrees and it makes them much more marriageable. So there are all sorts of measures that are going up and going up and down. I think that the fact that women's education is expanded so fast in Iran and that the voice of women is now so loud and insistently heard despite the ambivalence of the Islamic Republic towards all of this suggests that there is something unstoppable about this about this motion. But at the same time legally in all of the three successor states to these to the countries that I've been talking about there is there is a legal imbalance between between men and women. And of course you go.

[01:04:33] When I was in Turkey in 1996 when I first went there you hardly saw a woman in a headscarf in Ankara the capital and now it's full of them.

[01:04:43] So you get all these different signals and it's difficult to know how to read them I can I can report that from Tehran where I was two weeks ago. I was astonished for the first time to find that the headscarf as you well know sort of as it was in north Tehran which is very sort of westernised and modern and quite rebellious it sort of comes to about here.

[01:05:07] Now it's not just as your scarf. I mean it's completely gone. My God how did they do that. And enough of them are doing it so that the signals are very mixed just one more question. Right.

[01:05:24] Well it's a very it's a very interesting interesting question because I've I've often wondered and found remarkable among some people in the West and some of them in positions of immense authority that absolute resistance to the idea that anything can possibly be learned from outside and that anyone has anything to teach them. And so I think that that's. First of all is that idea has to become you know in a world where ideas flow pretty freely. There must be ideas outside the West that are worth looking at adopting. Modifying. And I don't think that that idea is is really part of our somewhat triumphalist mindset which is inculcated at an educational level and further wrong.

[01:06:19] With respect to the actual the national the nationalism that you're referring to and the populism I actually don't think I think we all know that the barriers of somehow breaking down any way or maybe have broken down and maybe to talk about the West and the rest is now somehow redundant but I think that in this case the populism is what we see it elsewhere we see it we see it in the Middle East as well as well.

[01:06:47] What is General Sisi but a nationalist an Egyptian nationalist. What is the one. Well he is partly an Islamist but he's also a nationalist what is Ahmadinejad in in Iran. I mean everyone knows him because he threatened Israel but ultimately his narrative is a nationalist and it's deeply popular. So I think and you look at Netanyahu's Israel you see what you see. So I think that this is a global phenomenon and it affects the Middle East. Just just just as it affects our own country. Well thank you very much indeed. Sorry I couldn't take any more questions.

[01:07:35] Thank you everybody for coming. I'm sorry we have to get him on a plane. So I wanted to leave time for a little book signing and other questions one on one so thanks so much for coming

[01:07:48] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.