Hamed Abdel-Samed, *Der Untergang der islamischen Welt: Eine Prognose* [*The fall of the Islamic world: a prognosis*] (Munich: Droemer, 2010). 240 pp. ISBN: 978-3426275443. EUR 18.00.

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In 2011, a revolution rolled through the Arab world – from the Maghreb to the Nile, from Yemen to Syria. Political and sociological analysts of the Arab world were surprised by the drive for civil rights and democracy (rather than for the introduction of Islamic law) – and some said that even Western secret services were not prepared. The book under review was not intended as a scientific treatise. Much more, it is a personal confrontation with Islam by someone ‘from the region’ who has studied Islamic studies and participated at the international level on the dialogue of religions.

The author, Hamed Abdel-Samad, a German-Egyptian political scientist, historian, and author, became known to the German public through his book *Mein Abschied vom Himmel* (My farewell from heaven; 2009). The book was a shocking and somehow credible autobiography of a Muslim who in 2002 received an award at the University of Augsburg for his contributions as an intermediary between cultures. *Mein Abschied*, however, was neither a settlement with his culture nor a call to abandon the Muslim faith. According to Abdel-Samad himself, he just wanted to understand the contradictions of his *own* life. It was the desperate search of a Muslim who has lost his faith – after many years in Germany where he has lived since 1985 – and who could not find a new one. The book was a depiction of the true odyssey of the author through phases of depression and confusion. Again and again a gap between different ‘life-forms’ opens to the reader who cannot help, but get the impression that that which has been described by the author on a personal level might also reflect the inner experiences of many Muslims living in Germany. For this book he received death threats and had to suffer invectives. Following the book’s publication an extremist group in Egypt issued a *fatwā* against Abdel-Samad, and he was put under police protection.

The biography of the author is quite relevant and therefore worth mentioning here. He was born in 1972 in Giza, Egypt, as the third of five children – the son of a Sunni imam! At the age of four he was raped by a 15-year-old male, which was followed by a similar incident at the age of eleven with a five-member group of young people in a Muslim cemetery!¹ Abdel-Samad went to Germany in 1995 at the age of twenty-three. He soon married an eighteen year older, rebellious, left-wing teacher with a penchant for mysticism. Abdel-Samad studied English and French in Cairo as well as political science in Augsburg, Germany. Later he worked as a scholar in Erfurt and Braunschweig. In Japan, where he was involved with eastern spirituality, he met his

second wife. He taught and conducted research until the end of 2009 at the Institute for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich. The topic of his doctoral dissertation there was “The Image of the Jews in Egyptian Textbooks.” Subsequently, he decided to become a full-time professional writer.

In his previous book, Abdel-Samad, who participated in the ‘German-Islam Conference’ held at the invitation of the German Federal Interior Minister, calls for an ‘Islam light’ in Europe without *sharī‘ah*, *jihād*, gender separation, proselytism, and what he calls ‘entitlement mentality’. He criticised the German political establishment for what he referred to as ‘appeasing’ Islam, while ignoring fears about it. According to Abdel-Samad, this behaviour created resentment in the German population.

Now Abdel-Samad continues his intellectual engagement with Islam in a new book which he has given the somewhat lurid title of *The Fall of the Islamic World*.² However, in spite of all his exaggerations and intensifications which are typical for his other writings as well, the theses of his ‘prognosis’ are remarkable and frightening at the same time. Referring to the analysis in a *Sealed Time*, a book by the renowned historian Dan Diner, Abdel-Samad tries to show that dramatic events are going to happen in the Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, in the course of the next few decades. In light of what actually *did* happen quite recently in some of those countries – the ‘Arab Awakening’ of 2011 – his observations gain importance – whether one speaks of his personal vita or his religious crisis as ‘confusion’ or not. According to him, those ‘dramatic events’ were inevitable because oil as the source of wealth will come to an end without any significant positive development in the education sector in these countries.

His book – somewhat similar in its approach to Daryush Shayegan’s *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*³ – portrays Islam as backward and as a culture inept to reform. In his view, a creativity and innovation-hostile cultural setting, a fast-growing, ever poor, education-hostile population, in some instances with increased population, and growing climate problems will become a dangerous, highly explosive social mixture which will lead to a mass exodus of millions of mainly younger Muslims to Europe. Compared with this horrifying scenario, the issues which are currently discussed in Germany in relation to the controversial theses of Thilo Sarrazin⁴ would be mere ‘peanuts’.

Therefore, quickly written phrases such as “If Islam would be a company, it would have gone bankrupt long ago” should under no circumstances seduce to claim the born Egyptian hastily as another supposedly more ‘anti-Islamic witness’. Abdel-Samad is rather seeking equidistance to all protagonists of the Islam-debate in Germany. He is looking at the civilisational aspects of the culture from which he himself originates. According to the author, someone who wants to take Muslims seriously must practice criticism of Islam. One should talk to them on an equal footing and should be honest with them, rather than treat them as people with ‘mobility disabilities’.

According to Abdel-Samad, migration is perceived by many Muslims in Europe as exile or mystified as such, and belief becomes the main feature of identification. Muslims would put their migration background into the foreground while insisting on their supposed 'special features' in the public and private space. He notes that no differentiated debate on Islam and migration has been held in Europe because the atmosphere in which *honest* criticism – free from propaganda, apologetics, and hypersensitivity – is actually missing.

The author argues that at the present, Islam is everything but 'powerful'. On the contrary, it is seen as ill and both culturally and socially on the retreat. Religiously motivated violence, the increasing Islamisation of the public space and the spasmodic insistence on the visibility of Islamic symbols are merely nervous reactions of this withdrawal. While many Europeans are anxious of an 'Islamisation of Europe' and the 'decline of the West', many Muslims see themselves more as victims of a Western 'master plan' for total control of their resources and infiltrators of their sanctuaries. Instead of reflecting on their *own* responsibility for environmental degradation, climate change, and consequences of globalisation 'the Other' is blamed. The actual 'threat', however, proceeds from the insufficiency of water and the upcoming drying up of the oil reserves. The comfortable retreat to the role of a supposed 'victim' which would make one's *own* actions obsolete belong almost paradigmatically to the self-image of modern Islam. Abdel-Samad further argues that the construction of an 'enemy image' has become imperative in order to convey something like an 'identity'. In his view, Islam sits in a self-made trap.

According to Abdel-Samad, for centuries a certain spirit has remained intact which is responsible for the 'stagnation' of Islam. This decline began with the destruction of the spiritual centres and the elimination of the intellectual elites by the Mongols, followed by the split of the Islamic world into numerous constantly warring kingdoms where education meant merely religious indoctrination. Abdel-Samad tries to demonstrate with many examples the continuation of this deliberate ignorance which was wanted by those in power and which was always used to strengthen the position of the rulers. Exemplified by current Egyptian textbooks, he reveals in detail how uninhibited falsification of history continues to operate. In this context of religious ideological education it could even be dangerous to teach Muslim children reading as mere literacy would not be a guarantee for a change. On the contrary, the half-educated and indoctrinated are much more dangerous than the illiterate because they believe to be in possession of eternal and absolute truths. As long as education in the Islamic world does not free itself from religion and ambitions of political authority, it would be more harmful than helpful.

However, Abdel-Samad lists also the errors of the West. To him, Thilo Sarrazin signifies a symptom of a convoluted dispute culture (*Streitkultur*). Neither in Germany nor in Europe is there a differentiated debate on Islam and migration. Therefore,

so his statement, populists on both sides succeed in occupying and poisoning the discussion. Of little help is also the indifferent attitude of the West toward the rulers of the wealthy Gulf states who were courted in the past in order to get cheap oil or to sell weapons. Unfortunately, however, Abdel-Samad's criticism of the West looks, at times, somewhat mechanical. His use of the term 'Americanisation', for instance, is applied by him as a synonym for 'lack of culture'.

In closing, Abdel-Samad's book tries to offer a 'third way' in the current polarised debate. It does not contain recipes for conflict resolution. It does, however, offer a comprehensive explanation of the processes that must take place in order to allow Muslims to connect intellectually with the realities of the present. In spite of the sensational title of the book and at times with too many references to his personal vita, *Der Untergang der islamischen Welt* should be taken as a valuable contribution to the current Islam-debate in the West, and it is hoped that there will be soon translations of it in English and the relevant Middle Eastern languages.

Notes

1. <http://www.taz.de/1/leben/buch/artikel/1/ich-bin-zum-wissen-konvertiert/> (accessed on 25 March 2011).
2. Apparently, in deliberate reminiscence to Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), the German historian and philosopher and author of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The fall of the West), published in 1918.
3. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997.
4. See Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* ['Germany does away with itself: How we are gambling with our country'] (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2010, 11th printing, 2010), and the review by Christoph Marcinkowski in *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 2, no. 4 (July 2011).

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The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT), the publisher of this volume, has become better known throughout the world as an institution dedicated to the pursuit of meaningful interfaith dialogue on a global scale. Perhaps its most well known initiative is *A Common Word*, the historic global Muslim-Christian interfaith initiative which has brought together leading Muslim and Christian scholars and public figures from all parts of the world and generated a series of dialogues held in major cities of the West and the Islamic world.