

## **Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static**

*Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammed Abu-Nimer,  
and Meena Sharify-Funk, eds.  
New York: Routledge, 2006. 272 pages.*

At a time when careless opportunism blurs the line separating the hate speech, race-baiting, and xenophobia that we condemn and the misleading expedience of “tolerating” others, the need to change how Muslims engage the hatred facing them has become most apparent. Threatened by French politicians with state-enforced settlement camps and neoconservative social engineering schemes that erect 10-meter high walls in the West Bank, Bel Air, and Baghdad, it is critical that Muslims demonstrate the ability to resist their wholesale criminalization with dignity and passion. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of those who publicly “stand-up” for “reason” are non-Muslim, western-based academics speaking for “Islam” as a non-western phenomenon that nevertheless “needs to be tolerated.”

When “Muslims” are given the rare chance of having a forum through which to communicate, the message has more often confirmed the reductionist assumptions of xenophobic racists advocating their legal exclusion from “Christian” Europe. How often has it been noted that those Muslims most frequently given access to the mainstream media are the fanatical and patently violent characters depicted in media stereotypes who actually have no right to “speak” for Islam in the first place?

*Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static* challenges these prevailing currents in scholarship by actually engaging the audience in a fashion that does not concede Islam’s centrality to a larger human experience. With con-

tributions from a wide range of scholars, this collection provides an important springboard to a new way for interacting with the larger world other than spoon-fed generic approximations of Islam that fit what often seem to be the propaganda agendas of various interest groups. While some of the commissioned chapters are clearly reacting to the traumatic experience of a “new world order” set by the suspiciously simple storyline of 9/11 during its aftermath, a precious few push the parameters of our discussion beyond apologies and spineless overtures to others’ charitable “tolerance” and articulate the dynamism of Islam’s multiple worlds.

With especially meaningful contributions from Salvatore, Arkoun, Abu-Nimer, and Senturk, this book is a worthwhile purchase. These original contributions do not simply repeat past work; rather, they directly address the new target audience with sophistication and vigor. Salvatore, for instance, offers a powerful reminder that we are living in a world that requires a forceful opening of new channels of communication and an empowering accommodation of those who do not fit the institutionalized nomenclature that is resident in an increasingly closed-minded world. Drawing from Asad and Connolly, who have both warned European societies (and the United States) that the modern state cannot control its citizens’ practices, relations, and loyalties, he pleads for a new set of institutions that will allow us to “reconstruct a plural tradition of modernity respectful of religious diversity while [being especially] mindful of the ... limits of existing patterns of secularity tied to the historic model of the European nation-state...” (p. 96).

The recognized power of the inherent pluralism that dominates the world needs to be reasserted not as a point of weakness, as Europeans did at the end of the nineteenth century, for that led to the systematic expulsion of those who were different. Rather, it needs to be celebrated in the very institutions that, in their own ways, Salvatore, Abu-Nimer, and Senturk argue are evident in many diverse Islamic communities. While Salvatore’s intervention is a particularly powerful contribution, one that perhaps could have been better highlighted by the editors up front, his message nevertheless translates well with some of the other contributions.

Abu-Nimer provides perhaps the most important pedagogical contribution, for he emphasizes the varied Islamic traditions that actively address violence in ways that should be adopted (and not shunned or apologized for, as elsewhere) in the larger world. Drawing from a wide range of sources, he demands that Islam no longer be subjugated to a distorted agenda of apology, but to one that acknowledges the variables of a long history of legal administration. This offers readers room to appreciate the strength of Muslim societies. The need to put human beings, their communities, and their

responses into context (pp. 183-85) highlights the forgotten fact that Muslim realities have to be understood and that local patterns of social organization do not have to be surrendered for the sake of adopting American “democratic principles.”

As an important contrast, and highlighting the important overlying message that Muslims and their societies are not static, Arkoun’s pained contribution is perhaps the most provocative commentary on the larger state of scholarship. Clearly at odds with many of his fellow contributors, he lashes out in remarkable candor at what he sees as a counter-productive reiteration of tired juxtapositions. Arkoun wants to “search for an intellectual paradigm more appropriate . . . to undertake the real work imposed on the present generation by the breakdown of all systems to thoughts and values” (p. 216). He complains that his colleagues do not fully appreciate the extent of the epistemological transformation that has taken place since 1945, a blindness that has resulted in a distorted adherence to formulas that exclude Muslims from the modern world. Failing to recognize the forces that operate on the tools we use to engage Islam and the larger world (even as these two seemingly “contradictory” elements are juxtaposed in our research), Arkoun argues that we are confusing how Islam’s historical, cultural, and intellectual context as “fact” contrasts with the sociological phenomenon. While these are rehashed ideas already explored in his earlier books, among them *Lectures du Coran* (1982) and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (2002), put in the framework of this volume, Arkoun makes his point well.

This book could have been put together in a better fashion. The wide differences in the quality of the contributions, which are broken into four sections, is a distraction. Often, the material is not only intellectually weak but repetitive. That being said, to those looking for a useful new source of material, even as a primary text for teaching an upper-level course, this book has much to offer. Assigning the whole book may not be rewarding, but including contributions by those mentioned above would immediately reveal just how dynamic the contemporary study of Islam really is. Moreover, some of these chapters reiterate the desperate need to champion new modes of analysis that will help us move beyond the dangerous reductions of Islam to a single articulation of what the “West” supposedly is not.

Isa Blumi  
Assistant Professor of History  
Georgia State University, Atlanta