

**Islam: Origins · Practices · Holy Texts ·
Sacred Persons · Sacred Places**

Matthew S. Gordon

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 112 pages.

In his book *Islam: Practices · Holy Texts · Sacred Persons · Sacred Places*, Matthew Gordon discusses the divinely revealed nature of Islam through texts, persons, times, and places. His book is a welcome addition to a new wave of introductory books written by western scholars who seek to present Islam objectively to western readers. The book's main argument is that, like other monotheistic religions, Islam is based on a set of divine beliefs that revolve exclusively around perceiving God through His many signs. These manifestations of God are evident in the religious texts, persons, times, and places that have figured in Islam since its inception. At the same time, Gordon argues that the Islamic tradition "is far from monolithic and is the product of many centuries of scholarship and internal debate" (p. 67). The target audience of this book is general readers and beginners in the field who are looking for a handy textbook on the subject.

This slim book is divided into nine chapters, each of which ends with a commentary on a selected text that elucidates the theme discussed, and includes a glossary, bibliography, and an index. Its style is clear and simple. As the most important source of Islam's genealogy, the Qur'an plays a major role in this study. In the first chapter, Gordon offers a brief historical review of Islam's religious and political development. By presenting different Islamic dynasties that ruled various parts of the world, the author reveals how Islam reached non-Arab peoples, which explains the fact that the majority of today's Muslims live in Southeast Asia rather than the Middle East.

In the second chapter, the author discusses the axis around which the set of Islamic beliefs and practices revolves. Gordon rightly argues that the divinely revealed nature of Islam stems absolutely from God's pivotal place in Islam. Specifically, he claims that "[t]he relationship between Muslims and God is informed by three principles that derive directly from the Quran" (p. 24): the "divine unity of God (*tawhid*)," "prophecy (*nubuwwa*)," and the "last days (*maad*)." At the same time, Gordon highlights the differences between Sunni and Shi'i Islam and also refers to two other principles that are exclusive to the Shi'i tradition: imamate and divine justice. Gordon's discussion of Sufism takes up a considerable part of this chapter because, for

him, Sufism genuinely exemplifies “the quest for a heightened spiritual awareness of the divine” (p. 29).

The author’s examination of the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition, as well as their divine significance, is the main theme of the third chapter. Specifically, he provides insight into questions of their structure and textual organization. Interestingly, Gordon devotes the selected commentary of this chapter to showing the differences and similarities between Islam and other monotheistic religions. The book’s fourth chapter deals with sacred persons in Islam, of whom Muslims regard Prophet Muhammad as the most important, because God sent down His last divine message through him.

However, due to various political and religious developments after the Prophet’s death, new holy personalities, particularly in Shi’i Islam, emerged. Thus, the Shi’is created the concept of the imamate that is centered on a holy leader known as the Imam. Shi’is (particularly Twelvers) also created the notion of the “hidden Imam,” a messianic figure who will return to lead the Islamic community before the Day of Judgment. Gordon portrays sainthood as another sacred aspect, the significance of which rests on the “saint’s piety and moral standing or upon his or her ability to transform the physical world (for example, through healing) or to summon the natural elements” (p. 56 f).

In the fifth chapter, Gordon examines Islamic law and its development from the inception of Islam until modern times. He divides the law into two main categories: sets of beliefs and rituals that arrange the relationship between God and humans, and practices that order the Muslims’ ethical conduct. The Islamic tradition, Gordon emphasizes, is the outcome of many centuries of scholarship and internal debates. He rightly introduces jihad as a good example of a contested issue that figures in modern Islamic religious and political discourse.

The sixth chapter deals with sacred places and their religious and cultural functions. Providing the historical background, Gordon highlights three Islamic communal institutions: the mosque and its components, the *madrasah*, and the *khanafa*. These places serve as both sites of worship and scholarship and, in addition, function as spaces of social activity. The seventh chapter examines Islam’s sacred rites and celebratory occasions. Gordon divides these practices into two main categories: the ritual duties prescribed by the five pillars and the communal practices by which Muslims celebrate important events in their religious history, and the “rites of passage” that signify different stages of the believer’s life until his or her death.

At the same time, Gordon highlights Shi'i practices and how they are distinctive from those of Sunnis.

Gordon dedicates the eighth chapter to dealing with death and the afterlife from an Islamic perspective. He emphasizes that the Qur'an offers more "description of heaven and hell than do other scriptures" (p. 93). These Qur'anic presentations emphasize that divine judgment is inevitable. In the last chapter, Gordon deals with the contemporary sociopolitical concerns that Islam confronts. Accounting for the rise of Islamic reformist movements, he offers a fair historical background in which he emphasizes the role of western colonialism in these religio-political developments.

Although this book shows the author's lucid knowledge of Islamic religious thought, it has, however, two main limitations. First, the presentations of the themes addressed could be more balanced. Specifically, at times the reader is under the impression that certain topics are discussed in detail, whereas others need to be fleshed out. For instance, in the second chapter Gordon devotes more space to Sufism than to Islam's principles of faith. Second, since this brief book is thematically oriented, the reader who does not have a background in Islamic history will find the chronological arrangement of the addressed themes difficult and sometimes confusing. Nevertheless, this book offers a positive framework within which western readers can understand Islam the way Muslims see it. No doubt, this effort will encourage mutual understanding between different religions and opinions in this critical time.

Abd al-Rahman Tayyara
Professor of Arabic, Department of Middle Eastern Studies
New York University, New York City, New York