

**Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures:
A Ziauddin Sardar Reader**

Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell, eds.

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Followers of the Islamization of Knowledge project probably know the work of Ziauddin Sardar best for its trenchant critique of that project. Yet the prolific British-Pakistani intellectual has written thoughtfully on topics ranging from the social consequences of science and technology and the future development of Muslim societies to cultural studies and the impact of postmodernism on religious belief. Since Sardar's work is scattered across books, academic journals, and science and news magazines, the

Reader is a most welcome compendium that showcases the breadth of his engagements.

The book contains 20 selections, which are divided almost equally into three sections; the editors' introduction, which I discuss below; and a working bibliography of Sardar's writings and index, both of which are very useful additions.

Part 1, "Islam," deals with the need to rethink Islam (chapter 1) and reconstruct Islamic civilization (chapter 2). Sardar argues that the process needs to begin by elaborating an Islamic worldview and a theory of Islamic epistemology (p. 38), particularly as these inform the Shari`ah. Chapter 4, "The Shari`ah as a Problem-Solving Methodology," posits that Muslims need to rethink the Shari`ah's divine status as a set of eternal laws and, instead, recognize it as a problem-solving methodology. Of course, this entails the necessary rethinking of such fundamental concepts as *ijtihad*, *ijma`*, *istislah*, and *jihad*.

Part 2, "Postmodernism," contributes to an excellent critique of postmodern relativism and pastiche, and the authors' treatment of postmodernism and Islam is far better than Akbar Ahmad's more optimistic but superficial attempt. In "Walt Disney and the Double Victimization of Pocahontas" (chapter 9), Sardar compares the Disney film to the historical account to reveal how Disney, and postmodernism more generally, refashions history to appropriate the culture of others. Another fine piece is "Postmodern(ising) Qawwali" (chapter 13), which recounts how the South Asian Sufi musical tradition was catapulted into the World Music charts through Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's "Dam Mast Qalandar." This piece is, in fact, a lesson in how postmodernism takes cultural productions out of their local contexts to produce jarring juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane.

Part 3, "Other Futures," emphasizes the inefficacy, nay harm, of western-defined development strategies and the reemergence of non-western civilizations from under the West's shadow. In fact, a case could be made that in the broad reformist current, Sardar appears to be the lone figure asserting the primacy of the future, which is quickly being colonized by economic globalization and the business of forecasting (chapter 15, "The Problem of Futures Studies"), over and above the preoccupations of the present. In chapter 19, "Beyond Development: An Islamic Perspective," the author reminds us that traditional societies were always attuned to the future in their concern to preserve resources for posterity (pp. 318-19).

The editors' "Introduction" argues that Sardar is, above all, a dissenting intellectual who does not easily fit in with the traditionalists, modernists, or secularists. However, the "Introduction" may have been better served by contextualizing his work within the broad reformist current of Muslim intellectuals, which argues that Islam has to be rethought in light of new knowledge and modern social conditions. By reading Sardar in this context, some interesting questions could be posed, such as: "What are the criteria for such rethinking?" and "How far should the rethinking of Islam be taken?" For instance, on the extreme end of the reformist current, Mohammed Arkoun (who also has a book entitled *Rethinking Islam*) argues that the insights of the modern human sciences compels Muslims to rethink Islam to such an extent as to question the very status of the divinely inspired Qur'anic *mushaf*.

But there is no consensus in this broad reformist current on the criteria by which to separate what can safely be assumed to be divinely ordained and eternal from what is taken to be socially constructed and open to revision. Sardar addresses these questions with common sense and navigates skillfully between the anti-foundationalism of much reformist, modernist thought and the absolute defense of tradition presented by scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr. For example, he points out that the insights of modern human sciences were inspired by a western worldview whose insights are not only irrelevant in the Islamic context, but that it would be disastrous to bring those insights to bear on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. He writes:

There have always been lively arguments within the world of Islam. But none of these arguments has been about the abolition of the starting point, the foundation stone: [the] Islam of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. No tradition with a grain of sanity can be expected to contemplate suicide as a rational choice. (pp. 235-36)

It bears mentioning that Sardar's style sometimes has the ring of a broad-stroke, popularizing commentary that overlooks important details. For instance, in part 1 he argues that neither Abu'l A'la Mawdudi nor Sayyid Qutb had an epistemological focus in their projects (p. 35). However, as Roxanne Euben has persuasively demonstrated, this is not the case. Moreover, when he avers that epistemology in the West has become too abstract but that in Islam it is pragmatic (p. 41), or when he argues that the Shari'ah and not theology has been the main contribution of Islamic civilization (p. 42), I cannot help but cringe, because it seems to confirm

the Orientalist view (e.g., Max Weber and W. Montgomery Watt) that Islam is theoretically insufficient. Part 2 also contains similar oversimplifications. For instance, Sardar often reduces modernity to nothing but its colonial experience and ignores other positive elements, and lumps together Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as deconstructionists (p. 184), and Jürgen Habermas with Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty as part of the postmodern rejection of metanarratives (p. 190). Can these types of slip-pages be overlooked in view of Sardar's objective to be not an expert but a polymath?

This book will appeal to a variety of readers interested in debates on the reformist current of western Muslim intellectuals, on Muslim reconstructions of knowledge, on the sociocultural aspects of science and technology, and to those interested in postmodern, postcolonial, and development studies.

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