

## *Book Reviews*

### **Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century**

*Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi, eds.  
London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004. 432 pages.*

In the introduction, the editors explain that the main motivation for producing this volume is that, in the course of the last century or so, the Muslim world has experienced unprecedented change to its societies and cultures that, in turn, has had a tremendous impact upon its intellectual life. The Muslim world's encounter with modernity has been a source of tension that has turned "Islamic discourse in the twentieth century into a crisis" (p. 3). In devising a framework for what they call the "dialectical relationship" between twentieth-century Islamic thought and modernity, Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer Nafi have resolved to construct their account around three themes: the emergence of new spokespersons, the diversity of twentieth-century Muslim discourse, and the connections and disruptions between Islamic thought and the rest of "the global intellectual arena" (p. 5).

With regards to the first theme, the key observation is that a new type of intellectual, one who is not part of the ulama' class, has taken center stage. The lack of consensus and almost "complete fragmentation" of present-day Islamic thought is attributed to the external challenges that the Muslim world has faced for the last 200 years. In fact, contemporary Islamic thought mirrors the very nature of modernity: the loss of certainty, challenged values, relativism, and an Islamdom – formerly assumed to be invincible – that has been shaken to its inner core. An interesting observation made in this respect is "the blurring of the contours between expressions of Islamic intellectualism and the academic study of Islam" (p. 11). As a result of their encounter with western scholarship, Muslim intellectuals felt increasingly compelled to respond to what they saw as Orientalist distortions. However, as area study experts, social scientists, and specialists from the humanities – among them increasing numbers of Muslim scholars – began to study Islam, it became possible to discern a "meeting of the minds."

As for the third theme: In the course of the twentieth century, such ideas and concepts as nationalism, democracy, human rights, and civil society were internalized in Muslim thinking with varying degrees of success. But that acceptance has not been unanimous, for the threat perception constituted by the onslaught of western – and therefore alien – values led to a “self-defensive cultural withdrawal” in some circles (p. 14). With regards to the ensuing “discourses of disconnection,” the editors do not fail to notice that these “dissenting opinions” are often coined in terms that are “connected to, or ... shaped, by the very West that is denied” (p. 15).

The contributions revolve around its three themes. Nafi opens by surveying the emergence of Islamic reformism. He traces its development from Ibn Taymiyya, via such sixteenth- and eighteenth-century renewers as Mulla al-Harawi, Ibrahim al-Kurani, Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (who responded mainly to internal impulses), to such leading nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformist ideologues as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida (who were primarily reacting to external challenges, particularly the political, economic, and cultural encroachment of western imperialism).

The diversity of contemporary Muslim thought is further explored by New Zealand Islamicist William Shepard. In an attempt to come to a typology of the new Muslim intellectual, Shepard distinguishes three orientations: secularist, Islamist, and traditionalist. In the course of his essay, he introduces some more subtle subdivisions into these very general categories. For example, he divides Islamists into radicals and modernists, with the latter category including such diverse figures as the late Mahmud Shaltut, Ali Shari’ati, Mahmud Muhammad Taha, and Ziauddin Sardar. However, Shepard places Isma’il al-Faruqi in the radical camp on account of his profound restructuring of epistemology, because he bases what would become his “Islamization of Knowledge” project on philosophical foundations derived from within the Islamic metaphysical outlook. Concerning the radical Islamists, Shepard rightly observes that they are quite modern, for example, in their use of state-of-the-art technology and jargon.

Shepard’s essay is followed by Elizabeth Sirriyeh’s fascinating account of present-day Sufism, which has shown itself remarkably flexible and adaptable. We find it either preserved and expressed by amazingly resilient Sufi orders or taken in new directions by such figures as Muhammad Iqbal, Said Nursi, and Fethullah Gülen. Even the New Age seekers have appropriated some of its rich legacy. In his extensive chapter on nationalism, Ralph Coury makes the point that contrary to the perception of Islam as being somehow

immune to nationalist ideology, the evidence of the last century shows that nationalism is very much a part of the Muslim world's political landscape. He holds the Orientalist legacy, which still lingers in many minds, responsible for the persistence of that erroneous viewpoint.

The next three contributions discuss how Muslims had to come to terms with notions of statehood, pluralism, and democracy (El-Affendy); economic activity in a Muslim context (Wilson); and the gender issue (Abugideiri). The author of this latter essay rightly complains that debates tend to be confined to women's roles as mothers and their central function in family life, this "at the expense of women's spiritual and legal rights" (p. 223). Such constricted views of women are indicative of what is really at stake: the failure to recognize them as integral persons and full-fledged Muslims.

The book's remaining three chapters deal with Islamdom's relation with other cultures and faiths. Jacques Waardenburg, a historian of religions, examines the diverse imaginings of the West in the Muslim mindset, which mirror the varieties in East-West encounters over time. Hugh Goddard discusses the complexities of the Muslim-Christian relationship, in which a number of issues intersect. Tension over Christian missionary activity has gradually been replaced by a Christian-Muslim entente, in the face of secularism's common threat, and has led to a widening of opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The position of Christian minorities within the Muslim world is often blurred by facile equations of Christianity with "the West." Editor Taji-Farouki's final contribution on Muslim thinking about Jews places a centuries-old history of living in close proximity against a new meta-narrative that is very much influenced by the more recent, and painful, experience coming from the Zionist project.

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