

**Progressive Muslims: On Justice,
Gender, and Pluralism**

Omid Safi, ed.

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Particularly since 9/11, students and the wider public have been asking North American Muslim academics to comment on current events, while Muslim students and the larger Muslim community tend to expect Muslim academics to “defend Islam” by engaging in apologetics. Nonetheless, this book begins by stating that its authors seek to raise the level of discourse about Islam, and want to avoid both apologetics and simplistic answers to complex questions.

The introduction makes frank observations about the present state of the world’s Muslims and calls for an intellectual response that seriously engages modern realities. It is followed by fourteen chapters, which are divided into three sections, which deal with contemporary interpretations of Islam, gender issues, and pluralism, respectively. The book concludes with a suggested further reading list and an index.

In the first paper in section 1, “The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam,” Khaled Abou El Fadl recalls the 2002 tragedy in which 14 girls died in Makkah because the police would not let them leave their burning school bare-headed. He asserts that while Muslims often respond to such events with silence, apologetics, or declarations that what non-Muslims think is irrelevant, they need to critically reflect upon such tragedies and reclaim mercy and compassion as core Islamic values.

In the second paper, “In Search of Progressive Islam beyond 9/11,” Farid Esack defines “progressive Islam” as a struggle for justice. He contends that progressive Muslims must not only oppose intolerant interpretations of Islam, but also critique the “fundamentalism of the market.” “Islam: A Civilizational Project in Progress,” by Ahmet Karamustafa, critically examines the “cocoon theory” of Islamic civilization and points out that, historically, Islamic civilization was diverse and enriched by many non-Islamic cultures.

In “The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam,” Ebrahim Moosa takes up the question of how progressives can approach traditional texts and Muslim history. He points out that the Qur’anic text presupposes an audience, and that readers, in any case, “make” norms in conversation with the text, rather than receiving it in a purely passive way. In addition, he argues against judging past generations by today’s standards.

In the final paper in this section, “On Being a Scholar of Islam: Risks and Responsibilities,” Tazim Kassam discusses the educational responsibilities of Muslim academics, who are often called upon to simplify complex issues and take normative positions on them. She advocates critiquing both the romanticism of Muslim apologists and the static depictions of Islam by many western scholars.

In the first article in section 2, “Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice,” Sa’diyya Shaikh points out that while western feminists tend to stereotype Islam as misogynistic, Muslims often claim that feminism promotes enmity between the sexes and promiscuity, while romanticizing Islam as liberating for women. Muslim feminists, however, locate their feminism in the Qur’an’s call for justice. She calls for Muslim feminists to critique both patriarchal interpretations and neo-colonial feminist representations of Islam.

In “Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law,” Kecia Ali demonstrates that medieval jurists understood marriage as a type of ownership of the wife’s sexuality by the husband, in which the wife receives dower and

maintenance in exchange for her continual sexual availability. However, as many modern Muslims find this conception of marriage repugnant, both neo-conservative and feminist-apologist discussions of Muslim marriage draw upon traditional Islamic law only selectively. She concludes that a new jurisprudence is needed to meet the needs of modern Muslims.

In "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims," Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle undertakes a long-overdue rereading of the story of Lot. He observes that the Qur'an does not address homosexuality *per se*, and that it presents diversity in creation positively. The textual basis for the claim that "Islam" demands the execution of gays is also called into question. The final paper in this section, "Are We up to the Challenge? The Need for a Radical Re-ordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women," by Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, could be faulted for its rather personal tone. However, its unusually candid comparison of the treatment of Muslim women today in the United States and the Middle East with the Jim Crow segregation of black Americans prior to the civil rights movement is thought-provoking.

The first paper in section 3, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue" by Amir Hussain, discusses relations between North American Muslims and people of other religions. In "American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam," Amina Wadud observes that African-American Muslims are often marginalized in the American Muslim community, both by immigrant Muslims and by outsiders, who do not see them as "authentic" representatives of Islam. She calls for an honest examination of intra-community racism. In "Islamic Democracy and Pluralism," Ahmad S. Moussalli discusses principles found in Islamic thought in the early and classical periods that he believes Muslim theorists could build upon in order to promote liberal democracy and pluralism.

In "How To Put the Genie back in the Bottle? 'Identity' Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in America," Marcia Hermansen points out the appeal of apologetic and anti-intellectual interpretations of Islam to a significant minority of Muslim students. In the final paper, "What Is the Victory of Islam? Towards a Different Understanding of the Ummah and Political Success in the Contemporary World," Farish A. Noor observes that Muslim unity tends to be pursued by demonizing "the non-Muslim other." He calls for rethinking the idea of ummah along non-confrontational lines.

While the quality of the papers is rather uneven and there are occasional slips into apologetics, on the whole, the book presents a number of thought-provoking ideas and (re)interpretations. The willingness of the editor and the

contributors to take on controversial questions with honesty is refreshing, and will, hopefully, set new standards for the discourse on Islam and modernity.

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