Book Reviews


Unfortunate as the events of September 11, 2001 and the chain reaction that has followed have been for Muslims, the one silver lining in the black cloud has been the unprecedented popularity being enjoyed by books on Islam. *The New York Times* and other bestseller lists have been carrying the Holy Qur’ān (in translation) and other books relating to Islam and Muslims for quite some time. Although the present book was published prior to 9-11, this is just the basic text that is required for all new comers to Islamic knowledge.

As Jeremy Rifkin, a well-known political commentator wrote in *The Guardian* on November 13, 2001:

I’m ashamed to admit it, but before September 11, I didn’t pay much attention to Islam....It took the deaths of [3,000] Americans in a horrific act of terrorism to get my attention. Like so many others, I have been reading up on Islam — its tenets, internal struggles, contradictions, visions and shortcomings, its similarities and deep differences with Christianity and the west.

I’m not alone. Seven of the 15 lead books on the *New York Times* paperback bestseller list are devoted to Islam. The Koran has become a bestseller. The whole world, it seems, has been converted into a classroom as we try to make sense out of the tragic events of September 11 and its aftermath.¹

Not bearing any authorship credit, *Understanding Islam: Basic Principles* was in all probability compiled by the editorial staff of the publishers, the Garnet Publishing Co. of Reading, UK. As the single-paragraph note (not titled as either the preface or introduction) at the beginning of the volume states: “This book is based on the revision, editing and rearranging of three books” which have been named as: *Basic Principles of Islam*, *Understanding Islam and the Muslims* and *The Status of women in Islam*. Given the short 99-page size of this book, one can only wonder as to how brief the individual component “books”

¹ [http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4297804,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4297804,00.html)
would have been. In fact the font-size of the present volume is also bigger than usual books and this makes the work even briefer.

This introductory note also clearly states the intended purpose of the book as being “to provide accessible and direct information about the basic principles of Islam as seen by the Muslims themselves in order to facilitate the understanding of Islam by non-Muslims and non-Arabs”.

As the note further states, the book is a sort of frequently asked questions (FAQs) list — an increasingly common feature of most websites these days. In fact, in an age when few have the time to go to books, such FAQs are the “still more easy” versions of made-easy guides (nowadays replaced by the very casually named “Complete Idiot’s Guide” series). However, not many people, including the computer friendly kids, are fully comfortable with doing all their reading on the screen. Hence is the demand for “hard copies” — printouts and books. In fact this book is much like an encyclopedia article on Islam covering the full range of topics that would form the first lecture a Muslim would like to give on Islam to an uninitiated audience, a demand that is increasingly being made on Muslim immigrants and expatriates living in the West.

Of course, numerous efforts aimed at providing the very essentials of Islam through “basic introductions” have been made over the years both by Muslims and non-Muslims and these have been published both in the Muslim countries as well as the West. These include the volumes by the well known Syed Ameer Ali and Dr Muhammad Hamidullah. However, the book under review is the briefest of the brief introductions to Islam and Muslims presently available.

The book is divided into three parts entitled, “General questions”, “Principles of the Islamic way of life” and “Other important questions”. So basic are the topics and so thin the volume that the book does not even require an index as the table of contents fully meets that requirement. For instance, the first seven pages carry answers to 15 of the most fundamental questions about Islam:

- What is Islam?
- Who are the Muslims?
- What do Muslims believe?
- How does someone become a Muslim?
- What does ‘Islam’ mean?
- Do Islam and Christianity have different origins?
- Who is Muhammad?
Additionally there is the one non-typical, yet very ubiquitous, question: “Why does Islam often seem strange?” In the later parts there are other similar very current questions like “Does Islam tolerate other beliefs?” and “What does Islam say about war?” However, the most important aspect of these answers, and indeed the whole book is the line appearing in the note (quoted above):

- direct information about the basic principles of Islam
- as seen by the Muslims themselves
- in order to facilitate the understanding of Islam by non-Muslims

However, it is not just the average Westerner who would benefit from Understanding Islam - Basic Principles, but also many Muslims who are looking for a very concise yet comprehensive volume on their faith. Such a readership would not only include the Muslims who were either born in the West or have lived there for a considerable period — especially the young ones — but also those born and bred in Muslim countries yet using English as their first language. The book includes foundational quotations — in original Arabic as well as translations thereof — from the most basic Islamic source, the Holy Qur’an.

In fact not only Muslim youth but young students of all faiths studying in the West are also being increasingly called upon by their teachers to write school assignments on Islam. For this purpose this book is a great boon.

In spite of its limited purpose as an introductory book and the matching volume, Understanding Islam - Basic Principles deals with some of the less basic but, from a Western point of view, the more controversial aspects of Islam. Chief among these is the status and role of women in Islam which most Westerners have long seen as the most medieval and anachronistic feature of what they perceive as the arch-conservative faith. Spread over 20 pages, this subject is put into perspective through “Historical Perspectives on Women” and “Women in Ancient Civilizations”. As for the Islamic view, as opposed to the “modern” Western view, this is dealt through the title “Women in Islam” that is further sub-divided into four aspects: spiritual, social, economic and political.

Another long segment of the book (circa 16 pages) deals with the relationship between Islam and Christianity. It covers topics like “Jesus (peace be upon him) in the Qur’an”, “Second Coming of Jesus”, and how Muslims prove that Jesus is not God through Biblical verses. In this section, there are Biblical references to the prophethood of Muḥammad (peace be on him), which are shown to have been altered in translation from the Hebrew to English. There is an extensive quotation from the Gospel of Barnabas which,
Muslims tend to believe, has been deliberately cast aside as it does not suit the established Christian view. One of the quoted verses from Deuteronomy (8:15) reads: “The Lord thy God will raise unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto Me; unto him ye shall hearken”.

Other important topics that reveal a human side of Islam — something not covered by the sensation-prone Western media — include answers to questions like “How do Muslims treat the elderly? and “How do Muslims view death?” There is the very topical “How does Islam guarantee human rights?”. All this of followed by “Islam in the United States”. Of course, given the events following 9–11, the last topic is now quite out of date even though it states the basic facts.

All considered, a more comprehensive but brief volume would be hard to put together. And for this Garnet Publishing, which has already established itself as a major publisher on Islam, deserves our complement.

Syed Akif


Mustafa Ćerić, the popular Reisu-l-Ulama of Bosnia and Hercegovina, wrote this work as his doctor’s thesis under Professor Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago some years after completing his undergraduate diploma from al-Azhar. War in Bosnia interrupted his subsequent teaching at ISTAC with the result that this important study on some crucial aspects of the history of Islamic theology could be published only after the cessation of hostilities.

Abū Mansūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥanafī al-Mutakallim al-Sarmarqandī al-Māturīḍī (333/944), of Persian or Turkic descent, was one of the most important Transoxanian Muslim laywers, philosophers, and theologians of the classical ‘Abbāsid period. However, with most of his books lost and his magnum opus, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, only discovered in Cambridge, by Joseph Schacht in 1952 and first published in 1970, his real
career only began after a millennium. (Neither did Ibn al-Nadim list him in his *al-Fihrist*, nor did Ibn Khaldun mention him in his *Muqaddimah*).

It appears by hindsight that Maturidi (in the Islamic far east), along with al-Ash'ari (in the centre) and al-Tahawi (in the far west), was instrumental in formulating the middle of the road synthetic Sunnī theology that reconciled tradition/revelation/dogma (*al-naql*) with reason (*al-'aql*). He did so by shunning both extremist and obscurantist literalism (on the right) and extremist ultra-rationalism (on the left). He could do so because he remained loyal to the Qur'an and the Sunnah while remaining exposed to Greek philosophy and its Islamic offshoot, Mu'tazilism. In particular al-Maturidi insisted that what is present (*shahid*) or known (*malum*) or given is a root (*'asli*) or a sign (*'ayab*) of what is absent (*ghayb*) or unknown (*majhul*) or searched for (*matliib*). Thus in his epistemological theory of knowledge he not only called for an intellectual approach to revelation but also defined the limits of such reasoning. That, according to the author, makes Maturidi most relevant for our age of intellectual stalemate in which Muslims must learn from their legacy rather than merely glorify it meaninglessly (p. 234).

Maturidi's *Kitab al-Tawhid*, a veritable exposition of *usul al-din* in the tradition of Hanafi *kalam*, is heavily indebted to Aristotelian concepts and distinctions. He deals with God (His existence and attributes), the world (as divine revelation to be studied through sense perception), and major issues that have faced Man such as the eternity (or not) of the universe and the dichotomy of free will and predestination.

Maturidi rejected the idea of a world without beginning (or one as an emanation) by maintaining that God was Creator even before creating. He treats the question of why God created the world (*lima khalaqa al-khalqa?*) as inadmissible, counselling — like Ash'arī — to accept the transcendental statements of the Qur'an *bi-layyif* — without asking “how?”. For Maturidi, to posit the world’s eternity was a form of *shirk*: allowing for a subsistent entity besides God. And the Mu’tazili trend of stripping God of all attributes he labelled as anthropormism in reverse — for reserving all attributes to man alone.

On the insoluble issue of free will versus predestination — implying that God was either unjust or limited — Maturidi argued against puritan Kharijism which threatened the *ummah* as well as against the permissive Murji’ism which was a menace to morality by simply submitting that God invests man with the power to act — a formula which simply begs the question. All of it is, of course, the kind of scholasticism which has been considered amusing ever since post-Kantian analytical-linguistic philosophy destroyed metaphysics.
Mustafa Ćeric must be congratulated for unearthing all this in a dense yet lucide manner. Indeed, there are only minor shortcomings to be noted. As is typical for a doctor’s thesis, the author makes a display of as much knowledge, whether relevant or not as possible. (Do we ever know more than during our doctoral exam?). Less typical it is that our author refers to himself mostly as “we”. This is tricky because it can be taken as modesty or, on the contrary, as *pluralis majestatis*.

The book needed some more editing: Footnotes should not repeat publication data available in the bibliography. On the other hand, the bibliography should list all publications that are mentioned in the footnotes or have been referred to elsewhere in the book. This concerns, for instance, the books by English, Davidson, Murtada, and Sezgin, all of which are missing in the bibliography. Also, a second edition should not describe “Gotha” as a library in Berlin, but as a city in the German federal state of Thuringia, famous for its ancient Islamic library (p. 37).

Murad Wilfried Hofmann

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The book under review is by a former Catholic scholar who accepted Islam in 1986. The stature of the writer, who is a trained theologian and has taught Trinitarian Theology and Biblical Studies for over three decades, is evident from the erudition, penetrating analysis and scholarly grasp of the subject displayed by the book. The extensive information, lucid style and sound treatment of the subject by the author fully bring out the skill of an experienced teacher and an able writer.

Much has been said and is still being said on the origins of the Christian Church and its founder, the latter being generally believed to be Jesus. From the advent of the Messiah to the present day there have lived millions of Christians and non-Christians who have entertained a variety of beliefs and doctrines, and have raised numerous questions as to who Jesus Christ was, what his original teachings were, what actually happened to him during the
days of his ministry, how he came to the world, what role he played in the
scheme of salvation, and what happened to him and those who accepted his
teachings and followed him towards the end of his earthly sojourn.

The scholars of three kindred religions — Judaism, Christianity and
Islam — have one thing in common: each asks some questions and also
provides answers to the questions as regards the person, life and teachings of
Jesus (peace be on him). Even though Jesus was born a Jew, and the Gospel
narrations present him as such in his sayings and actions, the majority of Jews
from his own time till the present have not believed in him nor have they seen
him as one of them. He was also not accepted by them to be the Messiah from
the line of King David, the one whom they had been waiting for. The few
Jews who followed him later developed into a distinct religious group. They
came to have a set of beliefs and concerns quite different from that of the
Jewish community.

The extant historical records, including the Gospels, indicate that Jesus
and his followers entertained the same beliefs and worshipped in the same
Temple as the other Jews. What really happened to these Jewish Christians is
one of the many areas of inquiry to which the book under review is addressed.
Did they belong to the Qumran community whose library was discovered in
1947? Were they the Essenes who shared the ideas of the Zealots who were
discontented with the Roman occupation of their land? Or were they pacific
loyalists who did not see any wrong in the Roman rule? The writer has
discussed these questions and has also examined whether the Jews and the
High Priests and the Sanhedrin were solely to blame for the ‘crucifixion’ of
Jesus (p. 13). The discussion and the overwhelming evidence presented by the
author sheds useful light on the socio-political milieu in which Jesus carried
out his ministry, making startling revelations regarding the true nature of the
people who followed him.

The Christians, on the other hand, might be quite off the mark as regards
the life and teachings of Jesus and the early history of Jesus’ followers. Jesus
Christ, as we know, is regarded by the Christians as the second person in the
Trinity who allegedly died for the sins of mankind. In the course of
disagreements and clashes that arose concerning his nature, thousands upon
thousands of Christians lost their lives. Quite contrary to their perceptions,
Jesus was not only a simple-hearted and good-natured human being, but also
one of the greatest Messengers of the One True God.

The writer ably brings into sharp focus the various theories that have
been advanced as regards the historical Jesus and his biographers as well as the
New Testament canon and the historical development of the Christian
tradition. She dwells on the major events of the life of Jesus: his relationship
with the Roman and Herodian authorities and the Pharisees, the events that led to his arrest, his ‘crucifixion’, ‘death’ and his subsequent ‘resurrection’ and the events pertaining to his disciples’ state after him, especially their leader and his brother James. All this is portrayed in the light of the traditional Christian sources, modern academic researches and, at places, according to the long-held Muslim views on the subject. Since this study is qualified as ‘Muslim’, Islamic beliefs and assertions on the above-mentioned matters feature prominently (see chapters 18 and 19).

The author forms part of a certain group of former Jewish and Christian scholars whose dissatisfaction with the religions into which they were born combined with their study of their own scriptures prompted them to search for the truth beyond their own religious fold which eventually led them to accept Muhammad (peace be upon him) as God’s Messenger and Islam as His true religion. These scholars include ‘Alî ibn Rabbâb al-Ṭabarî (d. c. 250/865) who wrote al-Dîn wa al-Dawlah..., ’, Naṣr ibn Yahyâ (d. 589/1194), the author of al-Nāṣihah al-Imāniyyah fi Fadḥat al-Millah al-Nasrāniyyah, ‘Abd Allâh al-Tarjumân (formerly E. Turmeda) (d. 823/1421), the author of Tuhfat al-Arib fî ‘l-Radd ‘alâ Abl al-Ṣalib, and ‘Abd al-Aḥad Dâwûd, the author of Muhammad in the Bible. All of those were Christian theologians and priests who chose to accept Islam. Likewise, there are also scholars of Jewish background who accepted Islam. These include Samuel ibn Yaḥyâ al-Maghribî (d. 570/1175), who wrote Iḥbām al-Yabûd, Sa’îd ibn al-Hasan al-Iskandarâni (d. 698/1299), the author of Masâlik al-Nadhar Ithbât Nubūwwat Sayyid al-Bashar. These were Jewish scholars who were eventually convinced about the truth of Islam and decided to accept it.

These scholars have had much to say about the religions which they once followed, and about what they had come to know through the Qur’ān about the “People of the Book”. The work under review is the latest among these works. It focuses on elaborating the implications of modern Biblical and historical studies on the origins of Christianity. It is a significant addition to the careful studies on the subject, especially since it is aimed at inviting the scholars involved in these studies and the believing Christians to consider the other side of the picture, viz. what the Muslims have been saying on this major historical event for the last fourteen centuries.

Apart from these converts to Islam, many scholars, who were born as Muslims, have also been carefully studying what the Qur’ān has said about Jesus and his followers about the nature of his message and how it fared after him. Some of them embarked on a careful study of the scriptures of the People of the Book, learned other languages needed to study other religious traditions. They also occasionally engaged the scholars of these religions in
Important names like Qādī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. c. 440/1048), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (505/1111), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) are among the ones who are commonly mentioned in this regard. The efforts of the above two groups of scholars — the converts to Islam and those born in Islam — were complementary. Notwithstanding that, all of them subscribed to the Islamic doctrine of universality of revelation and prophethood (see the Qur’an 16: 36, 10: 47, 13: 7). Thanks to that, Muslims have looked upon Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, John and Jesus, apart from the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on them), as God’s true message-bearers to humanity. This has made Islam the most tolerant and ecumenical of the monotheistic religions.

The author of the book under review has stated that one of the tasks addressed in her work is to raise questions about some of the puzzling aspects the origins of the Christian Church. These consist of the absence of the passages that discuss these origins in contemporary sources as they have been omitted in the course of editing. Thus there is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament as the birth place of the coming Messiah, nor that of the Essenes and the Qumran community in the New Testament, nor that of James, the brother of Jesus, who, rather than Peter or Paul, was the first head of the Christian church in Jerusalem, yet there is virtually no indication of his role except in a hostile manner; that the Jewish-Christian practices — prayers, circumcision, ritual washing, fasting and separating clean from unclean foods were declared heretical by the Christians who won the day. (See ‘Introduction’)

In the course of investigating these facts, and the factors that led to them, the writer was able to discover many other hidden facts all of which point to the possibility that something was done deliberately to present the whole picture with a definite slant, and that too at the cost of facts. In her analysis of these intriguing matters, the author rightly mentions the Jews, Jesus and the Muslims as a group distinct from the Trinitarian Christians. For example, she writes:

But the true point of these sacrifices for Jews, Jesus and Muslims, is not the propitiation of higher powers, it is a symbol of thanksgiving by sharing meat with fellow people. No one can seriously suppose that meat or blood is acceptable to God! It was a pagan fancy to reduce the Ineffable One to the level of a malicious entity that could only be appeased or bribed by blood sacrifices (p. 69).

The role of St Paul which is seen by the Trinitarian Church as having been that of preventing the Mother-Church from remaining just another sect
of Judaism. The writer says: “A Jew or Muslim might more cynically, and sadly, rephrase this: ‘without the tragedy of Paul’s sudden insight into “mystery religion” theology, the Mother-Church might have reformed Judaism into a new spirituality’ ” (p. 81).

To summarize the important findings of the author in the light of the evidence provided by modern Biblical studies and Islamic sources, it can be said that both Muslim studies and modern scholarship on the origins of Christianity underline the need to subject the dogma of the Christian Church to a critical scrutiny.

It seems evident that the original followers of Jesus “remained faithful to the worship of the One True God, and insisted that all Christians should keep the Law, which God had revealed through the prophets. They did not regard Jesus as a divine being but as a chosen Messenger of God…” (p. 6). But due to the dominant wish to break away from the stringent demands of the Jewish law, Judaism was considered an enemy of the new faith, which was therefore abandoned.

The writer, in line with many Western Biblical scholars, concludes that the Gospels’ narrations are not accurate, and it is clear that the earlier they were written the greater was the blame for the ‘death’ of Jesus put on the Romans rather than on the Jews. Also from around 70 ce onwards we find Christianity dissociating itself from the political ambitions and rebellious posture of the Zealots. It chose, instead, to be seen as a new “Mithras–type saviours cult, “with the difference that their hero was not a myth, but had lived as a real man” (p. 37).

On the role of James, Jesus’ brother, the real leader of the followers of Jesus after his ascension, there are indications that there “must have been a kind of agreement amongst the ‘orthodox’ Church hierarchy of editors to eliminate the rôle he played, and even to allow the supposition that he was ‘against’ Jesus, or that he disbelieved in him” (p. 46). The design seems to have been to belittle and even deliberately distort his highly important role and position in the early history of Jesus’ followers. With the end of the age of the Apostles and the early followers of Jesus had come to an end that an “impious error took shape through false teachers, who, seeing that none of the Apostles were left, shamelessly preached, against the proclamation of the Truth, their false knowledge” (p. 46). James might have been able to set the record straight except that he had been largely discredited.

As for the theology of St Paul and his movement, it led, as many scholars believe, to the emergence of the present Trinitarian Christianity. The authority that St Paul gave to himself has been seen by one modern scholar of religion as a catastrophe: “Saint Paul’s considerable authority in the ancient
church is largely the result of a catastrophe that shook Judaism and paralyzed the development of the Judaeo-Christian tendency".  

Even though some Christian theologians want to close their eyes to this fact, evidence abounds that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith in crucified Jesus “caused the severance of Christianity from Judaism and led to its beliefs being gradually recast with the mold of Hellenistic thought”.  

The author points out the significance of the fact that none of the anti-Nicene Fathers were genuinely Trinitarian. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, Hippolytus, Origen, etc., would not subscribe to the Nicene creed, from what have been found on their beliefs (p. 195). She takes pains to stress the impact of Constantine’s deliberate policy to clarify the ‘true faith’, unify the bishops, and establish one form of Christianity as the official religion of his Empire, “Upon his accession, the wild beasts in the arena were treated to their first taste of the blood of pagan heroes who refused to be baptised” (p. 196). Thus, it was only gradually and as a result of the interplay of many complex factors that Trinitarianism triumphed.

The author shows full awareness of the significance of the Dead Sea scrolls and the Nag-Hammadi discoveries as significant sources for the history of Judaism and Christianity. She note that the Catholic Church was reluctant to release the documents and had also been trying to play down their significance. However, some scholars are of an entirely different view in this regard. Rev C. F. Potter, for instance, says:

> There is hardly a book in the Old Testament that will not need corrections and improved readings in the light of the Qumran manuscripts, nor a New Testament book that will not suffer considerable reinterpretation of key verses on which doctrines depend.  

Few scholars, according to Potter, are yet prepared to admit “how many important doctrines are due to be changed radically, and how many others should eventually be eliminated when the Scrolls are properly recognized and evaluated in relation to the New Testament”.  

As for the many centuries of wrangling on Christology and the Christian theological doctrines, the writer rightly remarks that any “ideology or faith that is based on the tenuous foundation of blind belief cannot last and sooner

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4 Ibid., 15–16.
or later its adherents will begin to wonder, and will leave it for a more solid and rational persuasion” (p. 209).

The writer also emphasizes the importance of the Atonement doctrine, which in her view, is “the most important pillar in the whole superstructure [of Trinitarian Christianity]. Knock down this pillar, and the whole edifice is razed to the ground” (p. 211). On the other hand, she raises the questions: “Does it make sense? Did Jesus teach this?” The author not only responds to this in the negative, but also argues that it is incongruent with the teachings of all the prophets of God (peace be upon them). (See chap. 24).

The book is not only well-researched but is also full of flashes of insightful findings. The arrangement of the book, also seems commendable. Notwithstanding its redoubtable merits of the work, I wish to express my reservations, on a few points:

First, there are some oversights in numbering some verses of the Qur’ân: on p. 170 of the book the verse number regarding the ‘death’ of Jesus in the Qur’ân is mentioned as 5: 20 whereas it should be 5: 117 (p. 170). Again on p. 174, the same mistake recurs: the number of the verse should be 5: 117 rather than 5: 120.

Secondly, the author falls a victim to a conceptual error. The thesis of Kamal Salibi that ‘Îsâ ibn Maryam and Jesus Christ were two different persons has been uncritically accepted by the author. There seems, however, no worthwhile grounds to support that thesis. The author has quoted Salibi’s belief that the prophet ‘Îsâ “taught a strict monotheistic Judaism like all the other prophets …” (p. 141). Is it on the basis of the notion that Jesus Christ taught a trinitarian doctrine rather than strict monotheism that we should consider him to be a person different from ‘Îsâ? The portrayal of ‘Îsâ’s birth, life, and teachings leave no doubt that he was none other than Jesus Christ of the Christian Church, albeit he was presented by the Christian in a different light.

In trying to reconcile the positions of the Christians and Muslims, the author says the following: “However, setting aside the possibility that Jesus was a totally different person from ‘Isa, there is one way in which both faiths could concur, namely, if we consider the possibility that Jesus was indeed crucified, but instead of dying, was miraculously saved” (p. 171). The problem with this suggestion is that if we were to say that Jesus “was indeed crucified”, this would be in clear contradiction to the statement in the Qur’ân: “. . . they neither slayed him nor crucified him” (4: 157). The import of the verse is very clear: that Jesus the Messiah was not the one who was crucified or killed, but that Allah saved him from all that.
All in all, the book is a good contribution to the Muslim study of Christianity. The writer could have benefited from the many works of Muslim scholars both in the earlier period of Muslim civilization and the more recent ones. This at least is the impression I formed after going through the bibliography of the book.

Isa Muhammad Maishanu


The author, born in 1958 to the imām of Travnik in Central Bosnia, a political scientist as well as Islamologue, is presently teaching at the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Sarajevo University. A prolific writer, he has published among other works a two-volume translation of the Qur’ān into Bosnian along with commentary. He has also served from 1994–1996, under President Alija Izetbegovic, as Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The work, which brings together some 20 essays written between 1992 and 1999 and a *khutbah* delivered in New York, focuses on two different themes: (i) the fate of Bosnia and (ii) Qur’ānic hermeneutics.

In dealing with his victimized country, Karić displays not only bitterness and murky humour, but also melancholy and subtle, mystical poetics. Thus he refers to Bosniaks as “Muslim Europeans” and, ironically, to Serbs as “orthodox sons of Abraham”. He describes how the Balkan Muslims recently lived the time of their holocaust, Belgrade’s agenda being “to eradicate non-Serb elements”. Given the outrageous European passivity towards the massacres enacted by Serbs such as in Serbrenica, the author cannot help assuming “that someone very powerful has given Serbia a 200-year mandate to slaughter and exile Muslim Europeans” (p. 60). How else can one explain that “the entire modern history of Bosnia was but intermissions between genocides and ethnic purges”, the only crime of Bosnian Muslims being their Islam (pp. 89, 110).
Karič’s suspicion is even directed against a Big Brother editorial policy of *Encyclopedia Britannica* which virtually denies the existence of ethnic Bosniaks, calling them “Muslims”, i.e. Slavs converted to Islam, whereas Serbs are referred to without pointing them out as Slavs converted to Christianity (p. 66). Typically, the *Encyclopedia* also describes the Serbian aggression as a “civil” war, thereby insinuating equal guilt on the part of the victimisers and the victimised. Another instance of partiality and bias: Bosnian mosques are called “Turkish” thereby insinuating that they had foreign roots (p. 68 f.).

In Graz (Austria), I once heard Karič restate his major message: in Europe one cannot distinguish between indigenous and imported religions. Europe, as “Asia’s spiritual subsidiary”, is also the “Continent of Islam” (p. 78). In its multi-religious pluralism Bosnia indeed reminds one of Muslim Spain. May Allah forbid that it should suffer the fate of Muslim Spain.

Karič’s discussion of different aspects of the Qur’ān and its translations into Bosnian are characterized by his affinity to Sufism, in line with Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in the past and Martin Lings, Frithjof Schuon, Rene Guenon, and Sayyed Hosein Nasr in our own time. This corresponds to the strong Mevlevi, Qādirī, Naqshbandī and Halvatī traditions of Balkan Islam. Thus, Karič sees the Qur’ān as the cosmos which speaks and the cosmos as silent Qur’ān. He is also not opposed to supplementary normative interpretation of the Qur’ān, but rather tends to speculate about its trans-historical, esoteric meanings. This is typified by his playing with the transposition of the *masdar* F-R-Q into R-F-Q and F-Q-R (p. 147). Such an approach is not quite consistent with his assumption that the Qur’ān is not made according to human logic (p. 139), an insight that rather ought to lead to a more exoteric and literal interpretation of the religious texts, possibly *a la* Ibn Ḥazm.

The author is, however, quite modern in claiming that there is no final translation of the Qur’ān, that the earlier translations of the Qur’ān could possibly not exhaust all its meanings for Allah is equally merciful to peoples of all times. Thus the Qur’ān is like a river drinking from which is legitimate, regardless of the point from which one chooses to do so (p. 239). In a chapter on the “multi-interpretability of the Qur’ān”, Karič shows that the turbulences in the Muslim world during the last two centuries are neatly reflected in its treatment as a socialist, capitalist, scientific, psychoanalytical, evolutionist or revolutionary text in the interpretative writings on the Qur’ān (p. 211).

This brings to mind the era when the Islamic East was penetrated by Greek philosophy. However, in contrast to today’s globalization, Hellenism was not transported by the armament of a nuclear power. Nor was the Qur’ān
ever used before, as now by “Islamists”, as a concrete political text instead of a legal source (pp. 217, 229).

Essay collections run the risk of being repetitive. This is the case here too but only with a grandmother story about the desert as an endless labyrinth; it appears both on p. 19 and p. 134.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


The multiple ways that Muslims around the world make use of the World Wide Web had been a neglected area of inquiry, with the exception of several short studies by scholars such as Jon Anderson and Bruce Lawrence, until the recent publication of the pioneering work *Virtually Islamic* by Gary Bunt. While *Virtually Islamic* only begins a project that its author quite rightly expects will be a topic of increasing interest and importance, in this work Bunt establishes epistemological foundations that will serve as a useful framework for both contemporary discussion and future inquiry on Islam and the Internet.

Bunt sets out to provide a broad survey of the landscape of Islamic sites on the Web, what he conceptually defines as “Cyber Islamic Environments”. He seeks to explore the degree to which these sites represent different sections of the Muslim community or *ummah*, and the degree to which the Internet might help to create a new unified sense of *umma* in virtual space. Endeavoring to chart the impact of Digital Islam on the lives of Muslims around the world, Bunt makes use of personal interviews and e-mail survey forms to solicit diverse Muslim opinions. He opts to bypass technical discussions of hardware, software and HTML code in order to foreground the human dimension of the subject and the potential real-world influence of virtual presentations of Islam on both Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the first chapter, Bunt seeks to define his terms and clarify the scope of his inquiry. He draws upon recent Internet theory for concepts such as
“computer-mediated communication” and cyber “environments”. The concept of virtuality allows for the theoretical discussion of the interplay between virtual and lived communities. Recognizing that the concept of “Cyber Islamic Environments” implies a working definition of what makes a site “Islamic”, Bunt struggles with the complexities involved in attempting such a definition given the diverse and sometimes antagonistic ways that Muslims themselves define the boundaries of the term. With a general survey in mind, he wisely opts for a broad definition of “Islamic” that encompasses anything that Muslims do or say in the name of their religion. He attempts to circumvent the debate over what constitutes “true Islam” by relying on a description rather than evaluation: “It is not the purpose of this book to make specific judgements as to the validity of information offered on the Internet, merely to delineate the Islamic Internet landscape” (p. 7). Readers should bear in mind that the survey largely focuses upon Web pages (as opposed to other forms of Internet communication), and within this medium to environments that are mainly in English.

Given the incredible pace at which the Internet is changing, any author writing about the Net must bear in mind how quickly her work might be out of date. Bunt confronts this issue by insisting that the book offers a “snapshot” of Islam on the Web up to and including the year 1999. Like an anthropologist Bunt asserts the importance of preserving a record of the contours of twentieth century Cyber Islamic Environments, ostensibly so that future researchers will have a frame of reference through which to study new developments. In a clever use of the medium he is studying, Bunt touts a Web site (www.virtuallyislamic.com) constructed around the book project itself through which the links discussed in the book can continuously be checked and updated, and through which readers can submit suggestions or new material.

The second chapter deals largely with the various types of primary textual material available on the Web. The discussion of online versions of the Qur’ān, as well as online version of key texts such as Bukhārī and Muslim, is informative and helpful. Bunt rightly suggests that texts uploaded to the Internet should not merely reproduce paper editions but should take advantage of the resources that the medium offers such as search engines and hyperlinks. Bunt presents a brief discussion of Muslim music available on the Internet in this chapter, although the section may be a bit too closely associated with his discussion of Qur’ān recitation for some Muslims’ sensibilities, and much more could be said on the topic of music online. The brevity of the latter section brings to mind other types of Internet resources that could have been included in this chapter but were omitted or mentioned.
only in passing elsewhere in the book: Islamic art, freeware, teaching tools (such as online Islamic universities, “virtual hajj” sites), etc. While these are not primary sources, these types of resources deserve attention in future broad surveys of Cyber Islamic Environments.

The third chapter of the book addresses the key issue of “Muslim diversity online”, one of the ways in which the Internet has called into question both monolithic representations of Islam as well as traditional networks of Muslim authority. Bunt simplifies the categories of discussion by grouping them as Sunnī, Shīʿī or Ṣūfī. This move introduces one of the most problematic sections of the book. Despite his valiant effort to describe rather than evaluate, Bunt assumes a posture that treats conservative Sunnī positions as “orthodox”, implicitly relegating all else to the status of something less than orthodox. The section on Shīʿism is overly politicized around the subject of Iran (a subject that more properly belongs in the following chapter). The section on Sūfism artificially sets Ṣūfis apart from the previous two groups, neglecting the fact that despite the attempt of some groups to expel Ṣūfis from the fold, the majority of Ṣūfis consider themselves either Sunnis or Shīʿis. Bunt’s posture leads him to repeatedly make statements such as “this practice might not be seen as Islamic” or “this might seem inappropriate to some Muslims” when discussing both Shīʿism and Ṣūfism, disclaimers that may please some “orthodox” Muslims but become tiresome (if not offensive) to other readers. While Bunt does an adequate job of explaining how some groups on the one hand claim to make room for all Muslims while on the other exclude groups that they consider un-Islamic such as the Nation of Islam or the Ahmadiyyah, he does not explain why he himself excludes these “fringe” groups from his discussion. This issue is especially crucial given that the Nation of Islam tends to come up high on the list when users seek general information about Islam in some search engines.

The chapter on politics takes the reader on a tour of the use of Islam on the Internet by political parties in select countries around the world. In such a brief study this type of overview cannot pretend to be exhaustive, and to his credit Bunt does not strive for comprehensiveness. Instead he hopes that the countries he discusses will reflect the scope and breadth of issues that one encounters when examining the political dimensions of Islam online. The largest single section in the chapter discusses Pakistan, and despite the new political atmosphere in Pakistan since his book went to press, the diversity of political parties Bunt discusses in this section give an idea of the sweep of his survey: the Muslim League, the Pakistan People’s Party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Jama’at-i Islami Pakistan, Muttahida Quami Movement and Tanzeem-e-Islami. Flash points in the news generate loci of activity on the Web, and Bunt
devotes a significant number of pages to areas of political tension such as Afghanistan, Kashmir and Palestine. The Web has been used as a tool for organizing oppositional voices, and this chapter amply documents this phenomenon.

Bunt’s fifth and sixth chapters discuss online sermons, advice columns and cyber struggles. The issue of authority and legitimacy correctly receives prominence in these chapters, as does the issue of censorship and filtering technologies. The discussion of the “SuraLikeIt” controversy, in which fabricated Qur’anic verses were posted to the Web, shows how anti-Islamic activism on the Internet has encouraged some Muslims to become more wired. Other types of examples that Bunt provides nicely illustrate the Internet’s potential for allowing the relatively anonymous discussion of otherwise sensitive topics. His discussion of hacking and cyber warfare will probably spark the interest of many readers. Given the transience of Web links and the exponential growth of new pages, knowing how to evaluate the sites one finds becomes almost more important than knowledge of particular sites. Therefore it would have been nice if these chapters had described techniques that one could use to try to determine the positionality of the “authority” sources one encounters on the Web. Despite this lacuna, Bunt deftly outlines in these chapters the parameters of an open and important question, namely how traditional sources of authority will in time be reflected and/or subverted on the Web.

Although overly simplistic in some of its categories, this very simplicity coupled with ample background explanations make *Virtually Islamic* accessible to a wide audience. The work marks a crucial first step toward more specialized study of Islam on the Internet, appropriate for both casual “surfers” and dedicated scholars, technical neophytes and Web-savvy Netziens. Indeed Gary Bunt’s *Virtually Islamic* will remain critical reading for all those interested in examining the future development and expansion of Cyber Islamic Environments. It will serve as a snapshot of online Islam in its youth, with which it will be possible to compare images snapped in later years and to marvel at how much and how quickly it has grown.

Rick Colby

Not long ago, the collaboration between John L. Esposito, founding Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian understanding and John O. Voll, professor of Islamic history, at Georgetown University, had made a welcome contribution to the field of Islamic studies by their book *Islam and Democracy* (1996). Again the two prominent professors have produced a new and timely work that deals with the intellectual activities of the *Makers of Contemporary Islam.* The book introduces the life and works of nine contemporary politically involved Muslim “activist intellectuals” from different parts of the world. It is an account of eight men and a woman, their political life, ideas and contributions to the contemporary Islamic movements within their respective countries and to the Islamic movement at large. The book is comprised of nine chapters rendered in the following order.

The first chapter addresses the life, works and intellectual and academic contribution of Ismail Ragi al Faruqi. The Palestinian-American scholar, who was murdered with his wife in 1986, was among the most prominent Muslim scholars who contributed immensely and creatively in the United States during the formative years of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Faruqi’s activities, world travel, and writings “from his early publication *Christian Ethics* in 1967 to *Triadogue of the Abrahamic Faiths* . . . demonstrated his enduring interest and commitment to interfaith dialogue” (p. 33).

The second chapter is devoted to the works and contributions of Indian born and Jamaat-i-Islami activist-economist Khurshid Ahmed. As a leading figure in the emergence and promotion of what is described as Islamic economics, Ahmed has contributed to the theory and practice of this new discipline by serving in academia, government and financial institutions.

In chapter three, the authors review the developments and activities of the only woman activist in the book. The American convert to Islam, Maryam Jameeleh, perceived by the authors as a voice of conservative Islam, asserted the rights of Muslim women to provide a female interpretation to Islam. Through her prolific writings, Jameeleh criticized Muslims and non-Muslims alike arguing that “worship of Allah and submission to His will through wholehearted obedience to Divine revelation, is rapidly giving way to new idolatry of the crudest form, as more and more of us prostrate ourselves before contemporary deities of “Change” (p. 60).

Chapter four focuses on the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi who
through his approach of study to Islam and Western civilization created a science parallel to Orientalism which he calls Occidentalism. According to Hanafi, this ‘New Social Science’ “helps in the process of self-assertion, the minimization of the oppressive exogeneity and maximization of the liberating endogeneity” (p. 90).

The life and political activism of the Tunisian opposition leader and activist in exile Rashid Ghannoushi are addressed in chapter five. The authors describe Ghannoushi and his Ennahda [al-Nahdah] movement as a reflection of the “extent to which the growth and development of Islamic movements and Islamist thought can be conditioned and transformed by . . . multiple influences: Islamic traditions, the experiences of the failures of Arab nationalism, and socialism” (p. 117).

In chapter six, Esposito and Voll describe the Sudanese ideologue and theoretician Hasan al-Turabi as “the prototype, almost the stereotype, of the Muslim activist intellectual” (p. 149). Turabi is viewed from three different perspectives: his sense of this well-known religious family tradition, the formative influence of his father — a judge in the shari’ah court — and his distinctive mode of leadership as an uncontested leader of the Islamists in the Sudan (p. 119).

Chapter seven is the only chapter not written by the two authors. Valla Vakili describes the Iranian intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush as the foremost Iranian intellectual operating within the terms of religious discourse (p. 150). His writings have earned him a mixed audience within Iran and international recognition within the areas of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies.

The life and contributions of Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian statesman and imprisoned opposition figure, are addressed in chapter eight. Ibrahim, who served in several cabinet positions and as a deputy prime minister of Malaysia before his removal from office in 1998, was later tried and imprisoned. He has been described by the authors as “an unabashed globalist well suited to the modern world of market and media” (p. 177).

The final chapter explores the legacy of Indonesia’s former president and leader of one of the largest Islamic organizations in the world, Nhadatul Ulama (NU), Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur.

The introduction of the book is devoted to a lengthy explanation of the discourse theory or narrative framework from which they have approached their subject. This theoretical approach is fourfold. First, the authors broadly define the Muslim activist intellectual as the one who “provides an important aspect of the leadership of Islamic resurgence in the final decade of the twentieth century” (p. 5). The authors maintain that the dual role of such agents involves a permanent competence for criticism of the existing status
quo and the capacity to produce and articulate aspects of the existing culture. Secondly, the basic expressions of such a role of the Muslim intellectuals place them in a class of their own. In this respect they are differentiated from both the traditional Sufi shaykhs and the clerical scholars or ‘ulamā’. Thirdly, the emergence of the new Muslim intellectuals represents a challenge to the Muslim traditional establishment as it creates a modern alternative to both the conservative ‘ulamā’ and the secular intellectuals in the Muslim world. Finally, the authors describe these as modern-educated intellectuals who represent a continuation of the radical tajdid or renewal tradition in Islam. Such exponents of renewal, according to the authors, have built on the accomplishment of the early Islamic modernists including Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) in Egypt, and the new style of Muslim association created by Sayyid Abu ‘l-A’lā Mawdūdī (1903–1979) of Pakistan and Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906–1949) of Egypt.

Even if applied with a considerable success in addressing certain aspects of the life and activities of most individuals introduced in the book, the authors’ analytical approach does not seem to have much to explore and address the phenomenon within its wider socio-political historical developments and cultural universe. The result is that the modernity assertion, for example, has created a form of essentialization that has mystified and stifled the important developments of other fields of activities, players, and the conflicting political, social and cultural forces and expressions within the Islamic world and Muslim communities in the Diaspora. The attempt to grapple with the phenomenon in its complexity and different spheres of action and reaction is far from being captured by the modernist insights. It is true that these groups of Islamists are products of public and Western education; and also they, apparently, live with values of the city. This, however, does not make them a product of modernity for the following reasons: First, modernity as a Western project, according to most scholars, is one of the factors within both its militaristic and non-militaristic characters of the West’s power. Secondly, the Islamists’ political theory, according to its reflective thinkers and adherents, has emerged as a challenge to the major aspects of modernity: secularism, nationalism, socialism, etc. Nevertheless, one will agree that the whole process can hardly make sense outside the prevailing currents of modernity. Thirdly, describing those nine persons as makers of contemporary Islam raises serious issues as to whose Islam? And which Islam? Contemporary Islam is more diverse and complex to be represented by nine Islamists whose constituencies and appeal are rather too small to speak for Islam as a whole. It might be safer perhaps to describe them as makers of contemporary Islamism. Finally, it is important to note that the book is silent about a central issue and a major characteristic of
the Islamists’ ideology and practice which is their relationship to totalitarianism and violation of human rights. The Islamists have proved to be champions of totalitarianism and human rights violations. This is not only reflected in the writings of their founding fathers, Abū ‘l-A‘lā Mawdūdī* and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966)**, but also in their collaboration with such dictatorial regimes such as that of General Gaafar Numairi in the Sudan (1969–1985), Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan (1977–1988), and in their recent seizure of power by force in the Sudan as symbolized by General ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s military coup (June 30, 1989).

For those who grew up reading and following the political and intellectual contribution of this new breed of Islamists, the book might revitalize certain events and provide an opportunity to revisit the identity of those individuals as it has been cast as a project by a group of scholars who suffered less from the Islamists’ intolerance and aggression. For those who are not familiar with the ongoing developments of this movement in the Muslim world, the book might present an introduction to certain aspects of the life and times of a group of Islamists. However, there are many other aspects of the Islamists and their movements that are not by any means benign or civil.

Abdullahi A. Gallab

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Iran is in the middle of an ongoing conflict: the conflict between westernist reform and religious conservatism. President Khatami, elected for his promise of reform, is continually resisted by the orthodox judiciary and other

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* Apart from spending about five years of imprisonment, Mawdūdī was awarded death sentence in 1953 by a military court, which was later commuted to life imprisonment. After having spent about two years and a half in prison, the government decided to release him. Ed.

** Sayyid Quṭb suffered more than ten years of imprisonment, mostly rigorous, under orders issued by a special court appointed by the Revolutionary Command Council, headed by Lt Col Gamal Abdel Nasser. Lt Col Nasser’s government also arrested and relentlessly persecuted thousands of its political opponents, mainly those associated with al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn, and awarded death sentence to Sayyid Quṭb who was executed in 1966. Ed.
hardliners who enjoy a hegemony over what constitutes the ‘correct ideology’. In short, the question is whether westernisation is making a comeback through reform or not? This being so the book under review is very important because it helps us understand what ideas prevailed in Iran before the Revolution.

The author, an Iranian academic working in the United States, has offered fresh insights into the nature and status of westernisation in Iran which explains the final triumph of the ayatollahs.

Boroujerdi begins with the phenomenon of ‘othering’ which refers to treating other social groups as so different from one’s own that the former is hardly thought to be human. The phenomenon involves creating stereotypes and reducing the complexity of human beings to a single dimension in which good and evil could be painted in black and white. He points out that this phenomenon is explained by the French philosopher Michel Foucault and the Arab-American intellectual Edward Said. Said’s argument is that ‘orientalism’ was a way of ‘othering’, misrepresenting, and finally subjugating the East.

From this analysis, the author moves to his central hypothesis that Iranian intellectuals used ‘nativism’ — which is a kind of orientalism in reverse — to confront the West. Nativism is based on resisting acculturation, privileging one’s ‘authentic’ identity and desiring to return to a state of cultural purity. The problem, however, is that this ‘authentic’ identity is constructed and this construction is as political in nature as the construction of similar categories by western orientalists. Anyway, nativism is the primary source of inspiration among Iranian thinkers and often it is expressed in Islamic terms. In short, at least for intellectuals, it was not Islam that was the major source of inspiration but the compulsions of nativism.

To prove these assertions, the author looks at the lives and ideas of some prominent Iranian intellectuals, both of the secular and the Islamic type. Providing a who’s who of Iranian intelligensia, he places these intellectuals in the dominant milieu of their time. He begins with the argument that the Shah of Iran created a ‘rentier state’ which derived most of its revenue as rent from foreigners. This meant that while the state was flush with petro-dollars, it had not developed just systems of distribution of wealth. There was much dislocation and as young Iranians got educated they became more and more alienated from the repressive state. Militant organisations, such as the Feda’iyan and the Mujahedin-i Khalq, were formed in the late sixties and early seventies. Universities, print media, and even religious seminaries became hotbeds of revolutionary ideas. The state’s response was to unleash Savak, the secret police, on the dissidents but even barbarity could not contain them. The intellectuals continued ‘othering’ the alien state of the Shah.
The Shah’s enforced westernisation perhaps increased the intellectuals’ alienation from the West. In 1962, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad wrote *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) which came to be regarded as a canonical work regarding the blind aping of the West which the Shah was supposed to be promoting. Another intellectual, Fakhrroddin Shadman, believed that the West should be appropriated but in Persian so as to retain a sense of one’s Iranian identity. Yet another intellectual, Ahmed Fardid (1912–1994), advocated understanding the core of western civilisation by understanding its philosophy.

Meanwhile, a number of politically oriented ‘ulamā’ — Motahhari, Beheshti, Bazargan and, above all, Khomeini — became active in the sixties. They wanted to confront the state as well as the West but to do so they first wanted to reform the ‘ulamā’ who were preoccupied with theological debates of the medieval era. Khomeini’s *Velāyat-e Faqīh* (1971) was one such effort and the most successful one at that to establish the theoretical basis of creating an Islamic government. The clergy also opened a network of schools which proved very valuable for Khomeini in his struggle for power against all his rivals.

Then there were religious intellectuals of whom Ali Shariati (d. 1977) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are very well known. Both were born in religious families and later took degrees in social sciences and philosophy. Shariati tried to reinterpret Islam from the perspective of social revolutionary so that his work became the source of anti-Shah inspiration. Hossein Nasr turned to mysticism. He, too, interpreted Islam in a new light. Both were critical of modernity and thus contributed to strengthening nativist thinking.

Chapter six of Boroujerdi’s book deals with more nativists, especially those from the academia. Ehsan Naraqi, Hamid Enayat and Durush Shayegan are discussed in some detail here. Naraqi emphasized indigenous social research. Enayat suggested that the Iranian intellectuals were alienated from their Islamic heritage and, therefore, unauthentic. Durush Shayegan argued that nihilism is the outcome of western technology. He too, believed that Islam was the primordial source of Iran’s identity.

After the 1979 Revolution the intellectual debate took another form. The questions which now came to the forefront were as to how Islam was to be defined as a law and how the state was to be run on its basis. Among the debaters were Raza Davari and Abdolkarim Sorush. They discussed the philosophical arguments in Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which had just been translated into Persian then. Sorush took the position that knowledge is being constantly transformed so Islamic law (*fiqh*) is also open to new interpretation. He was supported by Mojtahed Shabestari, a clerical

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1 Bazargan was an engineer by profession. Ed.
intellectual. Davari, on the other hand, opposed the application of the scientific methodology to fiqh. The debate continues.

The major achievement of Boroujerdi’s book is that it provides understanding of the complex process through which intellectual viewpoints and discourses were articulated. Crucially significant is the argument that nativism rather than Islam was the major inspiration for most of the intellectuals but it came to be expressed in a religious idiom. This is worth critical attention, not only because this is a new insight into Iranian intellectual history but also because it helps us understand Islamic revivalist movements elsewhere in the world. In Maulānā Mawdūdī’s work, too, there is much that is inspired by his reaction to the West. Mawdūdī’s revivalist work also has the nativist element since it is not a continuation of the old medieval Islamic debates which preoccupied the traditional ‘ʿulamā’ of his time.

The epilogue tells us how nativism emerged as the sole ideological candidate which united most segments of the intellectual polity. However, now in the hands of the clergy, it has become a sacerdotal device to suppress other discourses. Moreover, nativism, like orientalism, is itself based on wrong theoretical premises. And yet it flourishes because of being a response to the West’s overwhelming power.

The book is very valuable for both theoretical insights as well as empirical information about Iranian intellectual and political life. I recommend it to scholars and informed non-specialist readers alike. It is a book which anyone interested in Islam and modernity should read and understand in the light of their own society. However, it is perhaps especially relevant for Pakistan, which has a highly developed intellectual discourse on Islam like Iran.

Tariq Rahman


Most research on Islam and Muslim communities has been distinctly ‘Sunni-centric’, based on the assumption that Sunni Islam presents the ‘authentic’ Islamic ‘orthodoxy’. Consequently, Shi`ah Muslims and their history have
suffered from considerable neglect by historians and students of Islamic history. Further, most of the limited corpus of writings on the Shi‘ahs focuses on the Ithnā ‘Asharī or ‘Twelver’ Shi‘ahs, particularly on the radical religious and political movements among them. Relatively little has been written on the Ismā‘īlis, who have been and continue to be important. This fascinating work on the Satpanth Ismā‘īlis thus comes as a very welcome contribution to the sorely neglected field of Ismā‘īli studies.

Despite being the most numerous of contemporary Ismā‘īli communities, the South Asian Satpanthīs, also known as the Khōjahs, have been marginalized in almost all studies of Ismā‘īlism. Kassam offers several explanations for this. She argues that most scholars take Fātimid Ismā‘īlism as representing authentic Ismā‘īlism, in contrast to which Satpanthī Ismā‘īlism is regarded as a ‘corrupt’, ‘superstitious’ and ‘Hinduistic’ degeneration. Then, she tells us, Ismā‘īlism is seen by most scholars on the subject as basically a political and proto-revolutionary movement, because of which the Satpanthī, with its apparent lack of concern for political power, is seen as an aberration, and, therefore, not worthy of study. Furthermore, she suggests, many contemporary Ismā‘īlis, concerned to provide their community and history with a more ‘orthodox’ Islamic lineage, see the Satpanthī as a deviation that needs to be reformed or even denied. Kassam, on the other hand, pleads for the need to recognize the Satpanthī on its own terms, as a unique Indic form of Ismā‘īlism, rather than as a deviation from a presumed Ismā‘īli orthodoxy.

The book begins with an overview of the Satpanthī, tracing its origins and later development in its western Indian context. Kassam shows the historical links between the Ismā‘īli Imāms of Egypt and then Almā’ūt with their Indian followers in Gujarat, Sind and southern Punjab, tracing the fascinating process of the spread of the Ismā‘īlī faith in India. She shows how Ismā‘īli missionaries sought to inculturate the message of Ismā‘īlism in distinctly Indic categories, because of which for its neophytes it appeared not as a completely different or alien religion but, rather, as a fulfillment of their own traditions. Thus, for instance, the Ismā‘īli missionaries accepted the Hindu notion of divine incarnations, accepting the legitimacy of the previous nine avatars of Vishnu, but presenting Imām ‘Ali as the tenth avatar who would usher in the much-awaited period of righteous rule. They also adopted several local customs and practices, as well as the singing of mystical hymns (ginans, from the Sanskrit word gnan or ‘wisdom’) through which they sought to propagate their views. By thus rooting their faith firmly in local ‘Hindu’ thought-forms and customs, they put forward the argument that the Satpanthī or ‘True Path’ that they were preaching was a culmination of the faith of the Hindu communities among whom they preached.
In contrast to others who have written on the subject, Kassam argues that it is wrong to see the Satpanth as simply a tool to facilitate the Ismāʿīlī missionary project. While she does accept the fact that the syncretism actively promoted by the Ismāʿīlī missionaries did play a central role in attracting large numbers of converts, she insists that the emergence of the Satpanth must be seen in broader terms. Questioning the argument that the Satpanth was simply a missionary device, she writes that in the period before the destruction of the Ismāʿīlī state in Alamut by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the Ismāʿīlī Imāms seem to have strongly opposed any efforts at syncretism by their missionaries in Sind and Gujarat, fearing that this would inevitably result in the re-absorption of the local Ismāʿīlīs into the broader Hindu fold. She writes that a deliberate policy of syncretism, leading to the crystallization of the Satpanth as we know it today, must be traced to the post-Alamut phase, when Ismāʿīlī missionaries attempted to form a coalition of local Hindu and neo-Ismāʿīlī rulers in Sind to counter the invading Turks, who saw the Ismāʿīlīs as heretics and, along with the Hindu rajas, as their major political rivals. The Satpanth represented a major effort on the part of the Ismāʿīlī missionaries to recover Ismāʿīlī political power in Sind and Multan, for which Hindu support was seen as necessary. The unique syncretism that the Ismāʿīlī missionaries presented in the form of the Satpanth also intended to provide religious legitimacy to this political project. This process of indigenization of Ismāʿīlīsm in India represented by the Satpanth was given further impetus with the fall of the Ismāʿīlī state, which led to a weakening of the control exercised by the Ismāʿīlī Imāms over scattered Ismāʿīlī communities. Furthermore, it provided the remaining Ismāʿīlīs in India a protective identity to escape Sunni persecution, in line with the Shiʿah acceptance of taqiyyah or concealment of religious beliefs.

The major focus of this book is life and works of the renowned Satpanth-i Ismāʿīlī missionary, the twelfth century Pir Shams, who played a central role in the evolution and development of the Satpanth. Kassam provides a translation of 106 ginans attributed to Pir Shams, which are still recited and sung at South Asian Ismāʿīlī ritual performances. These ginans cover a range of themes, providing an interesting glimpse of the missionary methods of the Satpanthī missionaries as well as of their political activities. They express the remarkable fusion of Indic, Sufi and Nizārī Ismāʿīlī concepts and motifs so characteristic of the Satpanthī, reflecting on the unique missionary methods employed by the Ismāʿīlīs in western India. They also show how the Satpanth mission, including Pir Shams himself, sought, through the ginanic tradition, to promote the political aims of the Ismāʿīlī Imāms, presenting them
as divinely-appointed saviours who would arrive to establish a utopian society free of oppression.

As a general survey of the little-known Satpanth this book excels. It provides fascinating details about the Satpanth that are not generally known to people outside the community. The book could have been strengthened by examining the contested nature of the Satpanth identity, in particular the later split in the community led by Imām Shāh of Pirānā, in Gujarat, with his followers, the Imāmshāhīs, representing themselves as the true Satpanthīs, which, in turn, led to the declining use of the term Satpanthī among the followers of the Āgā Khāns. Further, while the book contains vital information on Pir Shams and his followers, most of whom, as Khōjahs, are now followers of the Āgā Khāns, it tells us little about the other followers of the Pir who do not accept the Āgā Khan’s authority. These include many scattered groups in western India, particularly among ‘lower’ caste communities who are still formally ‘Hindu’. The image of Pir Shams that Kassam provides us with is one that conforms to Khōjah understandings, and does not represent the remarkably diverse ways in which the Pir is understood and revered by non-Khōjahs. Thus, for instance, Pir Shams is the center of a flourishing cult among the Meghwals and other ‘lower’ castes of contemporary Rajasthan, who revere the Pir as ‘Shamas Rishi’ while at the same time continue to be, at least formally, ‘Hindus’. Likewise, certain trading groups in Punjab, who call themselves as Shamsīs, regard Pir Shams as their patron saint. Including these non-Khōjah perspectives on Pir Shams would have provided an interesting contrast as well as clues to the continuing appeal of the Pir to diverse communities. That said, this book cannot be ignored by anyone interested in Ismā‘īlism and in the history of Hindu-Muslim encounters.

Yoginder Sikand

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