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-Nahda] 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 Soroursh 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 Qīṭḥ (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-Bashîr’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


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 Qīṭḥ 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-Muslimūn, and awarded death sentence to Sayyid Qīṭḥ who was executed in 1966. Ed.