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’an (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 Muhammad (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 Ćeric, 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 Ma'nūsir Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Ḥanāfī al-Mutakallim al-Samarqandi al-Māturīdī (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