Book Reviews


The events of the recent years have posed a host of challenges for Muslims and the manner in which they look at themselves and their ways of looking at the world. For many Muslims, who believe in the eternity of God's final message and its validity for all times, modernity and the associated debate on Islamic thought and practice have underlined the need for finding a renewed understanding of the imperatives of the Divine message.

It is with this objective in mind that ‘progressive’ Muslim scholars have sought to present a vision of Islam which, while being rooted in its original sources, willingly embraces the resources and spaces that modernity opens up. The issues that have been dealt with are of real concern and include social justice, the status of women, and the notion of the religious ‘other’ on a pluralistic pivot. These issues lie at the centre of the current debate on Islam and its relevance in our times.

*Progressive Muslims* is a significant and welcome effort providing an analytical overview by some contemporary progressive Muslim scholars who are attempting to respond, from within the traditions of their own faith, to some major inescapable questions that the debate on Islam over the past so many years has raised. Omid Safi, the editor of the book, who is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University and an eminent scholar on the modern history of the Islamic world and contemporary Muslim thought, states in his Introduction that the book was conceived in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, which had led to angry debates in the Western world about Islam. While detractors insisted that Islam was a veiled guise for terror and bloodshed, Muslims generally reacted by stressing that Islam in no way sanctioned the killing of innocent people, though there were a few voices that condoned the attacks as a Divine punishment on America for its ‘anti-Muslim’ policies.
Associated with this debate was the question of how Muslims, who interpret Islam in varying and – as the recent events unfolded – often in diametrically opposed ways, are seeking to understand their faith in the context of contemporary metamorphosis. To him, the challenge “is not to find some magical, mythical middle ground, but rather to create a safe, open, and dynamic space, where guided by global justice and pluralism, we can have critical conversations about Islamic traditions in light of modernity” (p. 6).

The contributors to this fourteen-essay volume are Muslim scholars of Islam with a commendable insight in other faiths. Most of them are engaged in academic pursuits in the West – but they are also described as “activists” (back cover). They seek to highlight the need for evolving a new understanding of Islam in order to address some of the urgent issues of contemporary life. In this endeavour, they have challenged the perceived notions and understandings of Islam by the detractors as well as the Muslim themselves. They have examined the historical perspective of Islam focusing on traditional doctrines and laws dealing with important social and interactive issues. They have underscored the need for understanding Islam from within its broader tradition that can play positive and proactive role. Their emphasis, like that of other reformists, is on the need of *ijtihād*, which they argue is at the heart of Islam, and which alone can bring forth its inherent dynamism. To insist on any inherited understanding of Islam, based on medieval *fiqh* or jurisprudential opinion, they say, is tantamount to ripping Islam of its eternal spirit and relevance. (See introduction).

*Progressive Muslims* project aims to bring out understandings of Islam that are sought to be denied or avoided by both the detractors of Islam as well as the radical Islamists. Khaled Abou el Fadl, in his essay, describes this as a process of “reclaiming the beautiful” (p. 62) in Islam, moving away from an obsession with coercive laws and moving towards the inner spirit of the faith. According to him, “shirking away from this responsibility or dealing with it in an irresponsible apologetic fashion would be tantamount to the abandonment of Islam” (p. 39).

Farid Esack, in his insightful analysis discusses the need for developing alternate perspectives of Islam that seek to engage with the religious ‘other’ as a fellow creature of God, working along with him/her in a joint struggle for social justice for all (see pp. 78–97). Ahmet Karamustafa describes it as a common “civilization project,” in which people of different faiths must work together, not against each other (see pp. 98–110). Ebrahim Moosa suggests a critical perspective on tradition, moving away from frozen notions of *fiqh* to recovering the inherent dynamism of the Qur’ānic spirit (see pp. 111–127).
The concept of equality remains fundamental to the *Progressive Muslim* project. The contributors seek to move the discussion of the notion of equality in Islam from a mere legal and theoretical proposition to actual empirical reality. It is not enough, they stress, to claim, as many Muslim apologists do, that Islam provides for equality of all. Rather, what is most important to them is to actualize that vision of equality in society as such. Central to this challenge is the questioning of medieval *fiqh* prescriptions that unfortunately deny such equality to large groups of people, including women, slaves and non-Muslims in general. For progressive Muslims, offering new insights on equality based on the spirit of the Qur’ān is a more urgent task. According to them, the medieval jurisprudential formulations are not consistent with the absolute equality of all human beings granted by God. Sounding, like reformists of medieval Islam rooted in the Greek tradition of reasoning, the contributors refer to the reported sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that might also appear to sanction inequality, and urge that either such traditions were not sound (pointing to the large number of concocted and weak *ahādīth*) or else they might represent a particular context (see p. 123).

This approach to tradition on the question of equality continues to manifest itself in several chapters of this book. Thus, Sadiyya Shaikh and Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons argue in their respective chapters (pp. 145–162 and pp. 235–248) for an Islamic feminism that seeks women’s equality with men, which might necessitate a re-reading of the Islamic tradition based on the Qur’ānic text (see p. 156). This would mean, as Kecia Ali suggests, a radical revision of jurisprudence as it relates to women’s rights and status and as developed by the medieval *fuqahā* in a patriarchal historical context (see pp. 162–189). Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle makes a bold attempt to present a study on sexuality and ethics and calls for further work to make Islamic laws more responsive to the several un-answered questions, such as homosexuality, spurred by the increasing debate on human rights (see pp.190–234).

Likewise, on the question of the status of non-Muslims, Amir Hussain argues for returning to the Qur’ān to generate more inclusive notions of the religious ‘other,’ and for the urgency of promoting inter-faith dialogue and respecting religious pluralism (see pp. 253–54). In this regard, Ahmad Mousalli puts emphasis on the need to combat anti-democratic interpretations of Islam that promote social hierarchies and inequalities, referring to the Qur’ānic notion of *shu‘rā* to underline his point (see pp. 297–98). On the question of racial equality, the celebrated African-American Muslim feminist writer Amina Wudud laments the silencing of black Muslim voices in the American Muslim community, suggesting that despite Islam’s call for radical social equality many Muslim societies continue to be characterized by deeply-rooted
prejudices against marginalized groups (see pp. 271–74). Finally, Marica Hermansen, echoing the sentiments of all the other contributors, advocates the urgent need to move away from what she calls “identity Islam,” a narrow obsession with communal boundaries, to uncover the moral and spiritual dimensions that lie at the core of Islam (see pp. 306–318).

Not everyone would agree, of course, with all that the *Progressive Muslims* has to say. One can find the very notion of ‘progressive’ Muslims problematic at a theoretical level. It might even be thought of as an elitist project, and as suggesting that all other Muslims are necessarily ‘regressive,’ or at best, ‘static.’ The somewhat curt manner reflecting at certain points in editor Omid Safi’s “Introduction” might, to some, sound a bit hubristic also. But, as one goes through the book, one finds the study rooted in logic and reason, triggered by the distress that came in the wake of modernity, and more recently, in the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. The contributors to the book warn us that the traditional and pathological understandings of Islam that continue to surface and hold sway, pose serious threat to the future of Muslims. It is with this concern that they stress the urgency of articulating visions of the faith that critically engage the multiple challenges of modernity, based on the fundamental Qur’anic teachings of harmony, justice and equality. To that end, the book offers a very incisive critique and highlights the compelling need for a wholesome and rational approach to the issues.

Khalid Mahmood


Since the end of the cold war and the beginning of a new set of relationships in the world, scholars have been concerned to understand the meaning, nature and purpose of this changed relationship. This book is Mahmood Mamdani’s contribution to its understanding and, as the theme suggests, it tackles one of the modern manifestations — terrorism — underpinning it as well as the widely held view that it is inherently embedded in the cultural identity kit of Muslims. Mamdani locates the objective of the book in the relationship