Book Reviews


The New Encyclopedia of Islam boasts an impressive number of over 1200 entries covering virtually every aspect of Islamic history, beliefs, practices, schools, and figures. As Houston Smith states in his introduction, the Encyclopedia has the ambitious goal of not only providing a handy reference on things Islamic but also dispelling deep-rooted misperceptions and distortions about Islam and Muslims. The relevance of such works in the current climate cannot be overemphasised. Furthermore, the book under review has stood a modest test of time as the first edition was published in 1989 under the title Concise Encyclopedia of Islam. The present edition has been revised and enlarged.

The most peculiar aspect of this book, however, has very little to do with its editions but rather with the perspective from which it has been written. The author identifies himself with the traditionalist school – a school whose major exponents include such figures as Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burkhardt, Martin Lings, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The Encyclopedia presents its subject matter from a particular, i.e., the traditionalist point of view, and the author is not secretive about it. The claim to objectivity, therefore, takes on a different meaning in the book.

This is what makes the Encyclopedia distinct and useful in some ways and susceptible to subjective interventions and limitations in others. Compared with works of similar kind, the Encyclopedia is an attempt to draw a new map of Islam rather than improving upon the existing ones. What is included and highlighted and what is excluded and subverted in this map is largely at the behest of the author and his particular point of view. This makes the Encyclopedia a rewarding text to read as one is presented with extensive analyses of various subjects that would receive a minor coverage in comparable works. A case in point is the four-volume Encyclopedia of Islam published.
between 1913 and 1938 (the new and much enlarged edition is still in progress). We thus read under the 5-page entry “Metaphysics” the Five Divine Presences as formulated by Ibn al-‘Arabî (pp. 142–146) or under “Hijâb” a short explanation of the veil put on by Muslim women and a longer exposition of the metaphysical meaning of the “veil” as “Divine Obscurity” and as maya (pp. 180–1). This is certainly commendable in view of the fact that Islam has been reduced to a catalogue of legal commands and prohibitions in the minds of many Westerners as well as Muslims.

This peculiar aspect of the Encyclopedia, however, is also what makes it, to put it mildly, a precarious enterprise. While what the author deems to be important gets a more than fair treatment, what he considers to be in conflict with his purview gets a conspicuously poor coverage. Consider the entry on Zoroastrianism (pp. 493–496). The entry is very informative, engaging and comprehensive but one wonders if such a disproportionately long and detailed account is called for in an encyclopedia of Islam intended for general readers. (It is not made clear anywhere in the book if it is addressed to the curious yet uniformed Western reader or to those who have some knowledge of Islam).

Now, consider the entry on Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī (p. 29). It suffers greatly from the lack of a balanced review and analysis when we read that Afghānī was a “political agitator ... an inveterate intriguer” and that “this political chameleon involved himself in perpetual intrigues, of which he always painted himself as the victim” (p. 29). A similar treatment is to be found in the entry on Muḥammad ‘Abduh (p. 19). Instead of giving a balanced and complete account of Afghānī or ‘Abduh, their works and ideas, the author castigates them for their modernist ideas. (In the same entry, al-‘Urwah al-wuthqā is called a “political/religious society”; while this is true, it was also the name of the journal published by ‘Abduh and Afghānī when both were in Paris). It is one thing to be critical and another to be overly biased and polemical.

The Encyclopedia is further marred by factual inaccuracies, some of which are quite serious. I came upon the following in a close reading of randomly selected entries. The “Alawi” is defined as “a religion”, signifying the “followers of Alî, professed by an ethnic group of the same name, the Alawis, found mainly in Syria, but also in Lebanon and parts of Turkey, particularly around Antakya where they are called Alevis” (p. 36). It should be pointed out that “Alawi” is not a religion but the name of the person who follows Alawism (or Alevilik in Turkish), which should not be presented as a “religion”. Information about Turkish Alevis are not only incomplete but also misleading as the Alevis of Turkey are comprised of people of both Turkish and Kurdish stock. Antakya is not known as an exclusively or particularly Alawite city.
The entry on *istiḥsān* (p. 231) is disproportionately short, providing the reader with very little explanation and analysis. What the entry has to say directly about *istiḥsān* is so general and insufficient that only the expert will make sense of it. Considering the central place of this term in Islamic jurisprudence, one would expect a more substantial treatment.

Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī’s tomb is not on the outskirts of Istanbul. The town of Eyüp is only 20 minutes from the Topkapi Palace and 5 minutes from the Topkapi gate from which Fāṭih Mehmet II had entered the city of Istanbul in 1453. Fāṭih Mehmet II’s name is given as “Mehmet Nasir” (p. 22), which is certainly wrong. The same mistake is repeated on p. 305. It is probably confused with “al-Fāṭih”, meaning “the conqueror”.

Mughal (misspelled as “Moghul” on p. 312 and other places) and Mongol are presented as synonymous in the entry on Akbar (p. 35) despite the fact that there are two separate entries on Mughals (“Moghuls”) and Mongols (p. 312 and pp. 312–314 respectively).

The definition of “Mudejar” as the “Spanish name for Arabs who remained in Spain after the Reconquest” (p. 319) is incorrect. *Mudejar* is the name given to Muslims who agreed, under a mutual treaty, to live in Spain under Christian rule before the Reconquista. The entry confuses *Mudejars* with *Moriscos*.

The entry on Mulla Sadra (pp. 327–8) is incomplete and leaves out such important parts of Sadra’s thought as the primacy and unity of being, substantial motion, and the unity of the intellect and the intelligible. The name of Sadra’s work is not *Shāhid al-rubūbiyyah* but *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah*. Contrary to the author’s claim, Sadra’s most influential work after the *Asfār* is not *al-Shawāhid* but *Kitāb al-Mashā’ir*. “Al-muta’aliyyah” should be spelled as *muta’aliyyah* with one “y” rather than two.

Ibn Rushd is claimed to have advocated the unity of the intellect and the intelligible (p. 199). The author seems to be confusing between the unification argument, which Plotinus, Mulla Sadra and others had defended, and what the Latin philosophers called “mono-psychism”, which they had attributed to Ibn Rushd as a philosophical heresy. In fact, Ibn Rushd wrote against the unification argument as a neo-Platonic deviation from the true spirit of Peripatetic philosophy.

There are some inconsistencies in spelling Arabic and Persian names. Rūmī is written as “ar-Rūmī” whereas most of the names are written with “al-” prefix, which is consistent with the rest of the book as well as the standard transliteration of Arabic names in English.

“Aaron” is misprinted as page title on p. 299. Lastly, the selection of entries, which is admittedly one of the most difficult aspects of writing an
encyclopedia or dictionary, presents another set of problems. While, for instance, there is a 4-line entry on ‘Alī Shir Navā’i, the 15th century Turkish poet and statesman (which should be placed under letter N rather than A), there is no entry, for instance, for ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī. Considering Nasafī’s role in the formulation and spread of the doctrine of the Perfect Man (al-insān al-kāmil) and his place in Persian Sufism, to which there are references throughout the book, one would normally expect an entry on him in an encyclopedia written primarily from a point of view that places Sufism at the heart of the Islamic tradition.

We hope that these mistakes will be corrected in future editions of the book. In spite of these imperfections, the author is to be congratulated for taking on such a daunting task. The book is beautifully illustrated with colour pictures, giving the reader a visual feast of Islamic themes. The Appendixes and Chronology at the end are useful. It might be a good idea to provide a bibliography or “further readings” to acquaint and guide the reader with new titles on Islam. If used with caution, the Encyclopedia promises to be a valuable reference book for the general readers of Islam.

Ibrahim Kalin


When it first appeared in 1982, John Esposito’s Women in Muslim Family Law provided a succinct introduction to both classical jurisprudence on marriage and divorce and recent modernist reforms in the Muslim world. Changes over the last two decades had made the book outdated as a resource. This new edition, significantly revised and updated with the assistance of Natana J. DeLong-Bas, provides a more extensive exploration of traditional jurisprudence as well as modern reforms, focusing on Egypt and India/Pakistan.

Esposito defines his subject as “Muslim family law itself — its classical formulation and modern reforms — rather than its specific application by courts” (p. x). Though there have been a number of scholarly monographs on the history or anthropology of applied family law in the Muslim world, there