scholars of Islamic and Turkish studies as much as it deserves. The authors conclude with excellent and comprehensive appendices, illustrated by charts and diagrams, and a helpful glossary of Turkish terms.

Zeki Saritoprak


Although the Arabic term “Islam” translates as “peace”, ironically Islam and terror seem to have become synonymous for many non-Muslims today. The word “Muslim” conjures up the most lurid images of a blood-thirsty fanatic, with the Qur’ān in one hand and a sword or AK-47 in the other, baying for “infidel” blood. That this is a crude caricature that has little substance to it is what this timely book seeks to argue. Lawrence’s basic contention is that Islam, like all other religions, can be interpreted in various ways, sometimes even mutually contradictory. It is in the nature of a text to be amenable to a variety of different interpretations. The Qur’ān, as the fundamental Islamic text, has been open to a multiplicity of understandings. Since unlike Roman Catholicism there is no official priesthood or church in Islam, there is no institution that can adjudicate on the orthodoxy of any particular understanding of the text. Thus, while some Muslims might find sanction from their own reading of the Qur’ān for an unending and relentless offensive war against people of other faiths, other, equally committed Muslims might understand the same Qur’ānic verses as enjoining universal love and harmony and as sanctioning recourse to violence only in self-defence as a last recourse after all methods of peaceful negotiation of conflict have been tried and failed. Indeed, this is the position that many modern-day Muslim scholars of any standing have actually taken.

This book is divided into three broad sections. The first discusses the phenomenon of what is commonly, though mistakenly, referred to as “Islamic fundamentalism”. Critically examining the emergence and development of Islamist movements in six Muslim majority countries — Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Saudi Arabia, Lawrence contends that any explanation that
seeks to root the phenomenon in an “Islamic” essentialism is bound to be partial, incomplete and misleading. Rather, he says, the genesis of Islamist movements must be traced to a complex interweaving of numerous factors — economic, political, social, in addition to ideational. Some of these factors are external, such as the continued Western support for Israeli aggression in Palestine, the genocide in Bosnia subtly abetted by the West, the continued oppression of the entire Iraqi population labouring under American-imposed sanctions, Western cultural invasion and neo-colonialism, and so on. American support for dictatorial regimes in many Muslim countries, and an unwillingness to countenance electoral victories by Islamist groups, such as in Turkey and Algeria, have only made the chasm between the Islamists and the West even greater. Lawrence argues that far from being backward-looking medieval obscurantists railing against the onward march of modernity, many Islamists are themselves modern educated young professionals, some with doctoral degrees in the sciences earned from the educational institutions in the West. Rather than railing against modernity, what many of them ask for is an embrace of modernity while remaining rooted in their own traditions suitably reinterpreted.

But what then of violence and terror? Lawrence rightly points out that only a few among the various Islamist groups would approve of terror tactics and the targeting of innocent civilians. The groups that do, such as fringe outfits in Egypt or now in Afghanistan, do not represent Islamists as a whole. In each case, he says, the factors that force some Muslims, like some Hindus, Sikhs or Christians for that matter, to take resort to violence must be seen as a response to a web of locally specific conditions. Factors such as growing inequalities, economic stagnation, political repression and mounting unemployment, rather than simple raw passion, drive some Muslims to seek to articulate opposition, sometimes though not inevitably, in violent terms through the mosque. There is thus no Islamist Intern, like the Comintern, working on a global scale. Indeed, as Lawrence indicates, the differences between various Muslim groups worldwide seem to outweigh what they share. This pertains not only to differing perceptions and understandings of Islam, but also to such facts of life that refuse to disappear in the face of the seemingly endless rhetoric of Muslim Brotherhood — factors such as ethnic, national, cultural, sectarian and linguistic divisions.

The second part of the book deals with the question of the status of women in Muslim societies. Lawrence contends, and here he merely reiterates what others have said before him, that not all Islamists are necessarily opposed to women’s rights. It is true, he says, that in several cases women’s movements are the primary targets of Islamist ire, seeing them as an insidious challenge to
received notions of gender relations. However, in other cases, such as in contemporary Iran, Islamist women’s groups are themselves in the forefront of demanding a wide range of rights of which they have been denied by tradition, grounded in their own vision of “Islamic feminism”. Again, Lawrence insists, the implications of Islamist activism for women must be seen in each local context separately. Broad generalizations here, as elsewhere, can be dangerously misleading.

The final section of the book deals, albeit all too briefly, with contemporary debates among Muslims on the much-misunderstood Islamic doctrine of jihād. Only a minority of Muslim scholars would see Islam as sanctioning offensive violence against people of other faiths. Lawrence writes that most Muslims would see jihād as essentially a defensive war on behalf of the oppressed. Others, such as Malaysia’s Mahathir Muhammad, would extend its scope to include struggling for the economic advancement of the poor, through peaceful means. One wishes that Lawrence had elaborated on this point, tracing it to the traditional Islamic debate on jihād as connoting all forms of struggle, not necessarily violent, to implement God’s Will on earth. In this broad understanding of Islam, working for the poor, providing them succour in need, could well be seen as the primary form of jihād. Or, as the Sufis would say, the principal jihād is the struggle against the basic passions of the ego.

This book is a timely contribution to an ongoing debate on the relationship between Islam and violence, a debate that has shed more heat than light. It cannot afford to be ignored by anyone interested in the relations between Muslims and people of other faiths.

Yoginder Sikand


In *Muslims, Jews and Pagans*, Michael Lecker argues for a new approach to the history of early Islamic Medina [Madinah]. Instead of concentrating on events, as has been customary among modern historians working on the period, he