in today’s era of globalization, the Islamic societies should be studied in the context of non-Islamic societies.

This volume is indeed a valuable work in so far as it helps understand the uniqueness of the circumstances of various Muslim minority communities vis-à-vis the majority non-Muslim communities. However, in the pursuit of “glocalization”, we should not forget the model for comparative study of Muslim societies suggested by Marshall Hodgson in the early 1970s in his three volumes of Venture of Islam. In the present volume, for example, the readership would have benefited from some discussion of the point that the issues confronting the Muslims of Transvaal in 1903 were not unique to them. One hundred years earlier, after the occupation of Delhi by the British in 1803, the Muslims of northern India asked Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 1239/1824), the foremost ‘ālim of the nineteenth century, these questions: should India under the British rule be regarded as dār-al-ḥarb or dār al-Islām; should Muslims cooperate with the British, learn English and join in the British service; and should they wear western clothes, socialize and eat with the British? Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz wrote detailed answers to these and other questions in the light of the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth and Fiqh and showed the same flexibility and accommodation which appeared in ‘Abduh’s response in 1903.  

The questions raised by Muslim minorities in India in ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s time and in Transvaal of 1903 are currently being raised in the mosques of New York, Toronto, London, and in other metropolises across Europe and North America in 2001. This multi-disciplinary collection of essays is a welcome contribution to the rapidly expanding body of literature on Muslim minorities in North America and Europe.

Sajida S. Alvi

* * *


Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran is a collection of debates between the author, Ziba Mir-Hosseini and the religious clerics of Iran. In this book, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a social anthropologist, presents the differing notions of gender that inform Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and the

ways in which the clerics perpetuate, change and reconstruct these notions. Hosseini pursues this theme by categorizing the clerics into three various groups based upon their gender perspectives. The first group classified as “The Traditionalists” insists on patriarchal understandings of gender and understands the _shar'i'ah_ to be immutable. The second groups entitled “The Neo-Traditionalists”, defend the immutability of the _shar'i'ah_. Yet they admit the need for a change in practice within the bounds of _fiqh_. The third group, “the Modernists”, are radical thinkers who want to break with the conventional wisdom of Islamic faith to readdress women’s issues.

Hosseini originally set out to write a book about indigenous forms and expressions of feminist consciousness in contemporary Iran. Yet, after most of her three months of fieldwork in Iran were stolen by a customs official, the material she was left with was from her meetings with the religious clerics in Qom — hence the current book was produced. Writing with her identities of an anthropologist and a Muslim woman, her book takes the form of a personal search for understanding Islam and feminism. She writes of her own personal experiences and identities in the hope of encouraging other women to write about their own trajectories and hence the possibility of exploring the relationship between feminism and politics and articulating the emergence of a new indigenous feminism.

This new emerging discourse on women in Iran is exemplified through her debates with clerics and intellectuals. Hosseini states: “I neither advocate an alternative model of gender relations as defended by clerics in Iran nor condemn their vision of gender, as their feminist critics have done”. (p. 10) She sees her work as an attempt to understand the premises in Islamic law that have so far prevented discussion between the religious clerics and feminists. She emphasizes ethnographic writings, giving the author a unique identity rather than trying to portray a false objectivity.

Since the author did not set out to write this book in its current form, one has cause to wonder how she fit together the remnants of her fieldwork in order to form them into a coherent book. The first part of her book was rather weak in the sense that not much of a debate took place between her and the clerics. It was more of a narrative based upon her translations of certain texts written by the clerics. Of course, this is understandable because these clerics are “the traditionalists”, who refuse to enter the realm of _fiqh_ and centre their understandings of gender relations on a “balance” between men and women, and any debate with an Islamic feminist would be limited.

The second part of her book is the strongest and most interesting. Even though Hosseini states that her debates were non-confrontational, her many discussions on gender issues with members of _Payām-e Zan_ were quite challenging. In 1995, _Payām-e Zan_ began to print her work and changed the
format in order to convey its own agenda regarding gender issues. Her analysis of the way in which Payām-e Zan edited and manipulated her original work was quite lucid and intriguing. The final part examines the approaches and ideas of two scholars, who recognize the need to readdress *fiqh* in gender issues. Hosseini questions some of their works, yet she does so less confrontationally and concentrates more on presenting their thoughts to the reader.

Disagreeing with her perspective of advocating for a locally based Iranian feminism, her book does put Iranian and Western feminism in a more proper perspective. Any Western reader will come away with more knowledge of the religious debate in Iran, thus bridging the gap between the Iranian secular and religious feminists as well as Western feminists. Since the author is on her own personal journey to reconcile feminism and Islam, she sometimes leaves out the “outsider”. Even though she states in a footnote that her reasons for excluding works by Western authors are not because she considers them of less value or less importance to the debate, but considers it a question of identity and sense of belonging. If her audience is primarily “non-Muslims” and secularists outside the country (p. 10), then why does she leave works written by her target audience out of her debate?

As a reader, one could relate to her questioning of men running Payām-e Zan, (“Women’s Message”), a women’s journal published by clerics in Qom, with women performing only administrative duties. Her realization of the importance of having men run this newspaper is illuminating. A Western reader would immediately question this conflict, as did Hosseini when she first met with the clerics who published the paper. Since men have more knowledge of *fiqh*, discussing women’s issues within this discourse helps in raising gender issues. Her book succeeds by bringing to the Western reader — her target audience — a better understanding and hence a realization of an Islamic feminism and its presence within the Iranian society. Hosseini was able to gain access to the clerics of Qom through the help of Seyyed Mohsen Sa’īdzādeh — a modernist cleric who advocates for gender equality. And so do the women who advocate for women’s rights need men to run Payām-e Zan, so did this author need a man to assist her in her research in the religious debate on gender issues.

One of the many positive aspects of this book is the author’s knowledge of the rules of the *shari’ah* and family law. She is quite learned in this area and is thoroughly commendable in her knowledge. Her argument on the importance of knowing the “rules” and being able to converse with clerics in their own “language” and “style” is one of the most compelling and praiseworthy attributes of the work. Yet, this great attribute of her style — her knowledge of the *shari’ah* and family law — could perhaps also be its greatest
pitfall. Even those who have a background in Islam and gender may find this book a little difficult to read and to follow. Her brief analysis of Shi'i Islamic law was a bit hard to follow and leaves the reader a little confused and wanting to know more. For this reason, the average reader probably will not pick up this book and become influenced by the author’s arguments or end up becoming more interested in the subject. The Western reader will possibly get lost with the highly legal and religious terminology.

The chapter on the Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Sorush gives the impression of being a little hasty, probably due to the fact that the author used notes from taped lectures given by Sorush. Hosseini harshly criticizes Sorush for not being a strong advocate for women’s rights in Iran. What she sees as “skirting around the issue” may actually be his attempt to get to the core of the matter. Sorush calls for a change in the system of jurisprudence yet, he believes that fiqh is not the place to start a discussion on women’s issues. Since so much of what is accepted to be true of Islamic jurisprudence is based upon centuries of “certainty”, this “certainty” must be questioned in order to begin the debate on gender issues.

To conclude, this work is a respectable contribution to the field of Islam and gender. Although interesting and informative, it is bereft of the challenging tone and temper that characterize other Muslim feminists’ writings. At the outset of reading this book, I was quite intrigued by the cover. A very mysterious Middle Eastern looking woman, covered in a black chador with huge moonlike eyes piercing into our minds, beckons one to read through the pages of this book. What was the author trying to convey with this picture? Is this picture not playing on a stereotypical, “exotic”, “unknown” Middle East “other” that treats women as “secrets” left to be figured out? Yet, the title does state exactly what this book is about — the religious debate in contemporary Iran.

The negative aspect of her book, being a collection of conversations between the author and the religious clerics, leaves one as a mere onlooker reading a narrative. Yet, her discussions with religious clerics were courageous and a positive step in the study of Islam and gender. The book is even more impressive as one remembers that her debates took place before the election of Khatami in 1997, and prior to his call for “equality”, “justice” and “rule of law”, expressed by reformist clerics and individuals throughout the Iranian society. Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s very presence as a participant within these discussions exemplifies the new gender debate and awareness among clerics, scholars and feminists in Iran.

Kerrin Wood

*   *   *