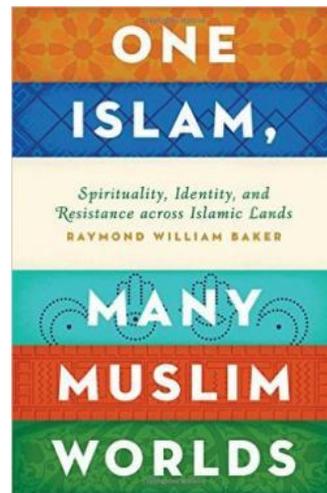


Book Reviews

Raymond William Baker. *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds: Spirituality, Identity, and Resistance across Islamic Lands*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi+376. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199846474. Price: Not listed.

Raymond William Baker's *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds* is a useful and timely contribution to the study of Islam and Muslims in the modern era. The dense, 376-page book is an informative and authoritative resource outlining the intellectual and social movements, political history, and lived experiences of various Muslim communities and their outstanding figures. The author masterfully weaves together these diverse histories and biographies to present a cogent account of Islam's "middle-way": the continuous mainstream of Muslim life, which has been too often overshadowed in Western studies of Islam by the disproportionate focus given to narratives of reactionary and violent extremist groups. The author's experience with the faith and its followers—over fifty years of studying, teaching, travelling with, and living among Muslims—has granted him an expansive knowledge of Islam, and an intimate acquaintance with the lived experience of Muslim persons. The imprint of this commendable background is noticeable throughout the book's detailed and thoughtful commentary. Equally compelling is the author's corresponding familiarity with Western studies of Islam, both classical and contemporary, which informs the book's welcome and thorough critique of the oft-biased or essentialist portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western understanding. The book's commentary is indeed not limited solely to Islam, but rather provides a critical comparative examination of the various methodologies and approaches used in cultural studies—anthropological,



historical, textual, and pragmatic philosophical ones. Even examined on their own, Baker's insight and incisive identification of the common pitfalls of such studies, particularly the effect of insider-outsider roles, are of value in themselves for the reader. Baker aims to show that the "middle-way" has been the main course of Islamic renewal, and that Islam's adaptation to the modern time has been on a non-rejectionist and non-violent path. Indeed, this is as it has always been throughout the religion's history, in spite of the negative public image fueled by the heinous acts of marginal, extremist groups, as well as the overwhelming media and academic coverage of "politicised" Islam.

Baker achieves his goal by covering in his book a wide range of original ideas and proponents of renewal and reform, as well as internal debates and critiques of these. This approach, while steadily upholding the book's main goal of presenting the *wasatiyyah* or middle-way—the position of Muslim intellectuals and scholars and their popular support—broadens the book's discussion by devoting sections to its critic's arguments, whether secularist, traditionalist, or radical extremist. As a result, the book makes a non-polemical defence of the realities of challenges faced by Muslims in their contemporary situation. This could not be achieved without the author's mastery of Arabic and other Muslim languages, which grants him access to the plethora of literature produced by contemporary Muslim scholars, intellectuals, journalists, political activists, and more.

The book is organised into ten chapters. In the initial, "The Mystery of Islam's Strength," Baker establishes his aim of "developing an understanding of midstream transnational Islam" (p. 15)—*wasatiyyah*—and its role in the Islamic renewal (p. 22). This chapter also contains an explanation of the author's "pragmatic method of understanding others" (p. 25). While developing this method, Baker was mostly influenced by the American pragmatist and systemic philosopher, John Dewey (d. 1952). Unlike conventional and popular Western studies of Islam, which focus on radical militant Muslims and their destructive power, *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds* considers the midstream Islam a powerful transnational force with a promising future, and a source of Islam's strength of renewal at a time of unprecedented weakness. While admiring the constructive power of the *wasatiyyah* and Islamic centrists, "who are primary actors in this book" (p. 15), Baker does not leave them without criticism. He endorses the centrist Islamic groups and individuals for their commitment to intellectual and moral activism. The *wasatiyyah*, according to him, shares "the focus on action rather than simply words, on the inclusive rather than the exclusionary and on rescuing the best of past efforts rather than destroying and building anew" (p. 16). On the basis of such a definition, the author selects a number of reformers from the eighteenth century onward,

who have contributed to what he calls “four waves of “renewal” through expanding networks, bases, and loops of transnational intellectual and practical connections” (p. 17).

Chapter two “Oases of Resistance and Reform,” presents a brief, praising account of Islamic resistance to colonial and “imperial powers [who] came to the Islamic world as carriers of a racist culture of violence,” causing disunity and dividing the *ummah* in order to facilitate their settlement and dominance (p. 28). Baker recognises three great surges of Islamic reform and Muslim resistance to foreign intrusions (his two favourite themes) from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Combining the political history of the Islamic heartland with the intellectual and social activism of key figures from Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Lebanon, he highlights their message in the words of Egyptian scholar Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), who pledged that “Islam will endure, even if those who struggle for it die” (p. 33). Baker’s presentation of the Muslim Brothers and figures such as Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) defies what he calls the dehumanised and “pervasive caricature” of these complex and influential figures of twentieth-century Egypt. In his discussion of cases such as that of Sa‘īd Nūrsī (d. 1960), and the spiritual Nurcu movement from Turkey and its role in overhauling the secular order of modern Turkey from within, the author portrays the multidimensionality of Islamic reform, and Islam’s survival against all odds. This chapter sets the tone for Baker’s subsequent coverage of the intellectual, moral, and political positions of the centrist Islam.

Chapter three “Guidance from the Center,” discusses the complex character of centrist Islam and the Islamic renewal as interconnected adaptive systems, which rest on flexible networks. The author aims to shift “the unhelpful focus on ‘political Islam’ [to] centrist Islam [and] its distinctive understanding of deep spirituality and Islamic civilizational identity as the heart of the Renewal” (p. 61). Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s contribution to the concept of “civilisational identity” with regard to renewal, as well as the contemporary online network of Islamic scholarship, are discussed. The centrist support of pluralism, social justice, rights of non-Muslims, democracy, and the necessity of making new *ijtihāds* suitable for a global age are among the controversial topics also explored in this chapter, as discussed by the Egyptian centrists of the “New Islamic School,” such as Tarek El-Bishry (b. 1933), Mohammad Salim Al-Awa (b. 1942), Fahmi Huwaidi (b. 1937), Ahmed Kamal Abu al-Magd (d. 2019) and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926).

“Heralds of Renewal,” the fourth chapter in the book, constitutes the most transnational and trans-sectarian presentation of “New Reserves for

Reform and Resistance”—what Baker refers to as the fourth wave. In this chapter, Islamic intellectuals and activists—Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah from Shi'i Lebanon, Necmettin Erbakan (d. 2011) from Turkey, Ali Shariati (d. 1977) from Iran, and Alija Izetbegovic (d. 2003) from Bosnia—join the compelling call for Islamic revival from Egyptian scholars. The chapter reveals how loose networks of reform and renewal from such diverse intellectual and political settings give an overall coherence to the voice of transnational *wasatiyyah*; a reflexive position that is equally critical of traditional conservatism, religious extremism, and secular Westernised programmes imposed in the name of development and progress.

In chapter five, the author seeks to reveal the existence of a genuine network of interconnectedness among the *ummah* during the medieval era in order to support the argument that a global Islam or global *ummah* is not a new notion, as some studies suggest. Thus, he moves imaginatively through medieval pathways with Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 1377 CE), the traveler, and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1466 CE), the theorist, to show how communities of diverse geographical, cultural, and religious background once lived in a harmonious and organic unity.

Baker's interest in anthropological pragmatism leads him to follow Fahmi Huwaidi, a well-known Egyptian journalist, through his writings and coverage of Muslim stories in chapter six. For Baker, Huwaidi's travel experiences and his work communicating them to the *ummah* “plays a parallel role for the contemporary Ummah” as did the *riḥlah* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (p. 184). In addition to these methodological insights, another valuable lesson from chapter six is the author's pragmatic analysis of midstream Islamic networks in his section on “learning from Huwaidi” (p. 185). One of Baker's most important adaptations from Huwaidi is his reference to “the enduring imprints of . . . the Islamic strategic triangle of Egypt, Iran and Turkey,” whose histories have been bound together for centuries (p. 188). In the rest of the chapter, Baker explains how “centrist reformism in Egypt, revolutionary dynamism in Iran, and quiet resilient mysticism in Turkey define three strikingly different modalities of the Islamic Renewal” (p. 189). In order to be more inclusive in his coverage, Baker also attempts to move beyond the strategic triangle, and briefly presents Muslim voices from Bosnia and China.

A discussion of the (in)compatibility of Islam and democracy, a much-debated and controversial topic in the past few decades, constitutes chapter seven. In his detailed “centrist” analysis of the issue, Baker critically examines the opposing sides of the debate: Western secularists or Muslim extremists who categorically reject any compatibility between the two; and those polemicists who uncritically equate Islam with democracy. The midstream

intellectuals, however, advocate democracy as the “surest path to a just social order” (p. 201)—a sublime Islamic goal. Recognising justice, equality, and freedom as the foundations of democracy, they acknowledge that, while justice and equality have been highly promoted in the Qur’ān, freedom, in contrast to these, has received less elaboration: “The new Islamic assessment of such political issues as *hakemeyya* [sovereignty] and the implementation of Shari’a takes for granted that Islam reserves all such issues to human discretion” (p. 212). This statement starkly contrasts with the ideology of extremist Islamists, who subscribe to a literal interpretation of the rule of God. Midstream intellectuals argue that “Islam clashes with democracy only when it is defined in a way that removes religion from the public area” (p. 219). By considering Islamic democracy as an unfinished project, the new Islamic intellectuals of *wasatiyyah* challenge the *ummah* and its interpreters of the *shari’ah* to bold thinking and openness and integrate the positive aspects of Western democratic experience into their theory and practice. Baker could not be clearer in presenting the claims and ideals of the *wasatiyyah* than by finishing his chapter with debunking the “unfinished yet endlessly repeated Western assertions that Islamic culture cannot nurture the values of justice, equality and freedom that democracy requires” (p. 237). Asserting that “Muslims have their own narrative of struggles for social justice,” Baker looks at how the lived experiences of Muslim peoples, and particularly the history of the core countries of the Islamic triangle, reveal proud battles for constitutional systems (p. 235).

Throughout his book, Baker seriously criticises the Western political and economic dominance of Muslim societies. However, he does so nowhere else as directly as in chapter eight, “The Islamist Imaginary,” in which he deals with the key issue of the Empire’s (America’s) interests, and the horrific methods it employs to protect them. These range from protecting client regimes and protégé ruling dictators in the region, to economic pressures and enforced cultural hegemonies to direct military invasions. Moreover, one of the Empire’s most indispensable tactics, used to justify such immoral acts, is to present Islam and Muslims as an “evil” enemy that should be combated by any means (pp. 239–41). In doing so, the imperial machinery of “religious building” (p. 253) is at work not just through Western corporate media’s dissemination of Islamophobic sentiment, but also through certain interest-laden “funded” research projects and scholarly publications, the target of Baker’s harshest criticism. In the effort to present irrational, violent, and powerfully dangerous “Islamist imaginary” (p. 251), they also “re-make” a so-called moderate Islam; a “malleable” Islam which does not threaten the

interests of the “Empire” and “can be turned into an instrument to confront the Islams of resistance” (p. 253).

In contrast to this previous chapter, chapter nine recounts the “Epochal Story of Islam and the Common People.” Baker firmly believes that this is nothing but the story of Islamic renewal (*al-tajdīd al-Islāmī*), a trans-ethnic and trans-denominational call resonating around the world. It manifests itself in genuine mass movements of *al-nās*, which embodies the universal and core message of Islam to humanity. It is a call to spiritual renewal and “at the same time, a very human story of the struggles of ordinary people against tyrants, social injustice, extremist, and invaders” (p. 269). The makers of this epochal story are neither the extremist radicals nor the passive traditionalists. They are the common people, *al-nās*, the main addressee in the Qur’ān and the message of Islam. Their story is the story of the midstream Islam, a reality that exists outside of the rigid typologies of Western analysts, which fail to explain “so fluid and adaptive character of a phenomenon as the *wassatteyya*” (p. 274).

“The River of Life,” the last chapter of the book, expresses the author’s hope and assurance that the Islam of *al-nās*—with its aspects of both renewal and resistance—continues to thrive in a global age dominated by the Western neoliberal order. To exemplify the struggles of the common people, Baker wraps up the book with a detailed exposition of the Arab/Egyptian “revolution” of 2011, and its subsequent events until 2013. Baker’s account covers the Egyptian revolution’s initial phase of triumph, thanks to its pluralistic and inclusive composition of the participants, and its true democratic election, as well as the shortcomings of and mistakes made by the elected Muslim Brotherhood. These mistakes divided the community and brought about its fall, as well as the eventual takeover of power by the Egyptian military—a coup unequivocally supported by the U.S., as it presented direct contact between the US officials and General el-Sisi’s team (p. 310). This last episode of the eventful history of renewal and resistance encapsulates the author’s frustration with and disdain for the Imperial intervention in the Islamic lands. However, the obstructions in Egypt do not shake Baker’s conviction in the fate of Islamic renewal as he looks into openings in Tunisians’ and Moroccans’ struggles.

Baker’s focus is on midstream Islam, *wasatīyyah*. However, his interweaving of the goals and ideas of centrist intellectuals with those of the common people, *al-nās*, obscures the relationship between the ideal and the real. Although the common people and centrist intellectuals alike desire social justice and a peaceful life, and reject tyranny, foreign invasion, and violence, it is difficult to believe that midstream ideals of pluralism and human rights (including women’s and non-Muslims’ rights), and their innovative *ijtihāds* are

fully and deeply appreciated and supported by the masses. In other words, while both groups may share the ideas and practices of “resistance,” they are not necessarily on the same page when it comes to the “reform” aspect of the Islamic renewal.

Baker’s discussion of the influential founders of “renewal and resistance”—figures from Iran, Turkey, Egypt and more—calls for critical inquiry regarding how some of these figures could be considered midstream Islamists. It seems that in the author’s criteria, “resistance” takes precedence over “reform” (chapters 2–4). Otherwise, how could Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Sayyid Quṭb, Ali Shariati, and Alija Izetbegovic be grouped together as *wasatiyyah* intellectuals alongside persons such as Sa‘īd Nūrsī, Salim Al-Awa and Hussein Fadlallah? Although Baker rightly does not regard Sayyid Quṭb as being in the camp of ISIS leader Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī and the like (p. 48), the author’s inclination to consider him amongst moderates still begs questioning. It seems that Baker has focused on Quṭb’s writings on social justice in Islam, while underplaying his writings on topics such as *jihād* and martyrdom, which—speaking on pragmatic level—have been sources of inspiration for several militant groups including the al-Takfīr wa ‘l-Hijrah and even al-Qaeda.

Baker’s enamourment with Ali Shariati and his revolutionary discourse of the 1960s and 1970s dominates his discussion of Iranian Muslim Intellectuals. While the book aims to provide an in-depth exploration of centrist Islam, it fails to examine the development of the genuine and constructive discourse of midstream Islam in post-revolutionary Iran. At the end of his consideration of *wasatiyyah* in Iran, Baker’s references to this rich dialogue remain scanty and incomplete. Moreover, the author’s discussion of centrist Muslim politicians, such as Necmettin Erbakan of Turkey or Mohammad Khatami of Iran, lacks any analysis of the socio-economic and political factors that contributed to their success (pp. 103–21).

Women, an important topic in any study of contemporary Islam, regrettably receive the least coverage in Baker’s book—mostly under the subtitle of “Islam and Sexuality” (pp. 141–45), and also, surprisingly, in chapter five, “Medieval Pathways and Ibn Battuta.” Indeed, no female Muslim scholar or activist receives any attention or credit in Baker’s book among the makers of the “centrist Islam!”

Without intending to imply that there are only fixed models or any single definition of the modern notions of pluralism and globalism set by the West—it is difficult to accept any premise that uses these terms as if they were universally applicable to the diverse medieval Muslim community, and to the *ummah* and its laws and networks. Among a number of inconsistencies, one

that stands out is the underlying epistemic difference between the values and norms of each era.

Baker's unconventional approach to his subject matter and his method of presentation—which is influenced by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *riḥlah*, or travel book—demands a patient reader with a good knowledge of Muslim history, religious thought, and social life in diverse settings and eras. While the book remains a valuable resource, and a must-read for graduate students and scholars of Islamic studies, some undergraduates and general readers may not benefit from it if they are looking for a quick, straightforward answer to Islam's conundrum in the present time. These points, and other possible criticisms of the text, by no means, reduce the overall value of the book.

Forough Jahanbakhsh*

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