

The new voices of Islam: Reforming politics and modernity – A reader. Edited by Mehran Kamrava. New York: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2006, pp.302. ISBN: 978-05-20-25099-4.

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The New Voices of Islam is edited by Mehran Kamrava, and is a compilation of writings of fourteen scholars. This book introduces the readers to the concerns and issues of Islam, from the perspectives of “reformist” Muslim thinkers. The volume reveals the richness as well as the limitations of attempts to synthesise Islam and modernity.

In chapter one, Mehran Kamrava, the editor of the volume, argues that the voices of “reformist” Muslim thinkers are radically different from the “dominant face” of Islam (p.2) which the author describes as “orthodox”. In chapter two Mohammad Arkoun explains the need for the emergence of the “modernist” discourse among the Islamic thinkers.

Ṭariq Ramadan, in chapter three, offers a broad overview of *Shari’ah*, *maṣlaḥah*, *fatwā* and *ijtihād* both in relation to the history of Islam and the growing presence of Islam in the West. He analyses in details *al-Maṣlaḥah* (the common good) by providing its historical development and contemporary relevance. Ramadan also analyses *ijtihād* and its conditions (*shurūṭ*). He discusses these legal terms in light of writings of classical and medieval scholars of Islam.

Chapters four, five and six are devoted to a discussion on Islam and democracy. In chapter four, Fethullah Gulen examines the multi-faceted and complex relationship between Islam and democracy. He argues that while analysing religion, democracy, or any other system or philosophy accurately, “the focus should be on humanity and human life” (p.100). Gulen is of the firm belief that Islamic principles of “equality, tolerance, and justice” can help shape democracy to be a more “humane and just” system (pp.103-4). In chapter five, Mohammad Talbi offers the view that religious liberty is fundamentally and ultimately an act of “respect for God’s

sovereignty” and for the mystery of “God’s plan of humanity” (p.117). Chapter six, written by Mohsen Kadivar, offers extensive references to the Qur’ān and hadīth, demonstrating the emphasis Islam stresses on freedom of thought. He also explains the judgments rendered by Islam on Muslims, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians and others, first in the light of the most original sources and then considering the references through which they are substantiated.

Chapter seven by Muhammad Shahrour is a personal reflection on some of his experiences following the publication of his controversial book *The Book and the Qur’an: A Contemporary Reading*. In this chapter, he claims that in our times “genuine *shura* means genuine pluralism of points of view, and democracy” (p.149); and he concludes that modernity is a “rejection of fanaticism and offers pluralism to all members of society” (p.151). In the next chapter, Nasr Abu Zaid provides a discussion of the essence and spirit of the Qur’ān in light of his experience in recent years. He argues that Muslims need to focus on creating just societies based on “creatively formulating and integrating thoughtful and political discourse into daily life” (p.176).

Chapters nine to eleven deal with the role of women in Islam. For example, in chapter nine, Leila Ahmad who was born in Egypt and currently lives in the U.S., provides an in-depth analysis of the role and position of women in the earliest days of Islam. She chronicles the tensions between the pragmatic and ethical perspective about the role of women in Islam. In chapter ten, Amina Wadud, a controversial author, points out that the Qur’ānic teachings and Islam as practiced at the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) were liberating for women as well as for men. She argues that today more women are active in the discussion and reformation of female identity than at any other time in human history and this moral agency is a mandate of the Qur’ān and cannot be restricted by any amount of “historical precedent, social custom, or patriarchal aspirations” (p.204). Chapter eleven by Fatima Merssinni maintains that despite the best efforts of Islamic fundamentalists to keep women segregated and in socially inferior positions, the processes of social change that are underway in the Muslim world, access to formal and informal sources of power, are bound to erode the fundamentalists’ segregationist agenda.

Chapter twelve by Chandra Muzaffar emphasises a slightly different perspective on Islamic hermeneutics. The chapter points out the importance accorded to justice in the Qur'ān and deals with some of the main obstacles that justice currently faces in the Muslim world and the rest of the world. It examines the internal threats to justice from within the Islamic community as well as global dispositions and obstacles that perpetuate discrimination and injustice.

The last two chapters of the book try to raise some philosophical aspects associated with the earlier issues raised by the various authors in the book. For example, in chapter thirteen, Hasan Hanafi argues that there is no fundamental separation between facts and values when properly understood and practiced. He offers a philosophical perspective on the essential compatibility between science, freedom and democracy. The final chapter of the book, written by Abdolkarim Saroush, provides a detailed discussion on the basic philosophical compatibility between Islamic rationality, freedom and democracy. For Saroush, freedom feeds only on freedom, and reason feeds only on reason (p.252) and he goes on to argue that we need both internal and external freedom. For him, internal freedom can be achieved only “by the light of submission and through following the guidance of the divine messengers” (p.261). In his view, what we need today is to combine internal and external freedoms: the freedom predicated on submission and the submission predicated on freedom. He opines that we should tie these two “together” and desire them “at once”(p.261).

The editor of the volume deserves special appreciation for bringing out this commendable work to a wider audience. This is a must read book for all those interested in hearing the new voices of Islam in general and for the students of modern Islamic thought in particular.
