

Reformist voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and modernity. Edited by Shireen T. Hunter. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009, pp. 322. ISBN: 978-0765622389

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The publication of this informative, nuanced and well-written book reflects the ideas about moderate and reformist voices and trends within Islam that have recently appeared in the Islamic world. *Reformist voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and modernity* is an answer to those who view Islam as a conservative and extremist religion. The book consists of nine chapters written by renowned Islamic scholars that offer an extensive review and study of voices of Muslim reformers in different parts of the world, for example, Shireen Hunter on Iran, Hassan Hanafi on the Arab East, Yahia H. Zoubir on the Maghreb, Riffat Hassan on South Asia, Martin van Bruinessen on Indonesia, Farish A. Noor on Malaysia, Recep Senturk on Turkey, Farhad Khosrokhavar on Europe, and Tamara Sonn on the United States.

According to Riffat Hassan “Islamic modernists advocate flexible, continuous interpretation of Islam in order to reform those aspects of Muslim tradition and law that have become outdated, fossilized, or harmful by scrutinizing those aspects in light of Islam’s normative sources – the Qur’ān and the authentic *Sunnah* (p.160).” However, the readers should be cautioned that it is not Islam that is being reformed but the traditions and rituals of Muslims that divert them away from the real path of Islam. Nevertheless, a number of contributors to this book not only engage in writing about the true Muslim reformers but also writing on negative kind of reforms that can create confusion about Islam in the mind of readers who lack a proper understanding of Islam. Take for instance, the case of Javed Ahmad Ghamidi in Pakistan who is described as more “modernist” and “reformist” than most Muslim scholars who challenge some prevalent interpretations in what is a sensitive subject for many Muslims. One of those interpretations is that he believes that headscarves for women is a preferred part of Muslim social custom and tradition, but it is not a directive of the *Sharī’ah* (p.179). Another

so-called reformist voice is Kassim Ahmad in Malaysia who criticizes the reliance on the *ḥadīth* and calls for a return to the Qur'ān particularly in his book *Hadith: A re-evaluation*. According to him, the political and economic power of Muslims declined because they lost their dynamic ideology based on the Qur'ān and relied on the *ḥadīth*, codified two centuries after Prophet's death, as a source on par with the Qur'ān (p.220). As a result, his book was banned in Malaysia.

The basic methodology used in the book is descriptive, analytical and comparative. Some of the nine chapters provide works of thinkers and religious figures that are not that known in the West, particularly the chapter on Iran and the Maghreb. While interpretation and application of reforms are a strong thread throughout the book, this does not lead all the authors to reject the notion that reformist voices of Islam have some salient characteristics: the struggle with power and powerlessness, identity and assimilation as well as modernity and dissatisfaction with the approach of traditional '*ulamā*' that is wedded to the doctrine of imitation or jurisprudential precedent; the advocacy of *ijtihād* although they differ as to the extent to which they believe *ijtihād* is permissible; and, the crucial distinction between *Sharī'ah* as the divine path and *fiqh* which is the human efforts to understand *Sharī'ah*. Therefore, based on these, the Muslim scholars examine traditional and modern Islamic thought by dealing with a range of issues that include *inter alia*, secularism, democracy, governance, history, women's rights, institutional networks, Muslim organizations, international relations, economic and political institutions and others. Islamization of knowledge advocated by Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī is also discussed to integrate Islamic values and modern learning (p.269).

It is also highlighted in the book that the root causes of the emergence of the Islamic modernists and reformers also differ from country to country. These can be explained as reactions against the Western rule in the country, developments within Islamic communities themselves in view of the authoritarian nature of most post-independent governments, disappointing results of modernization policies which have not succeeded in mitigating the socio-economic disparities, the manipulation of religion by political leaders, and various regional and international developments.

Readers will aptly discern that the true Muslim reformers have had their fair share of difficulties in upholding their religious standing and at the same time trying to defy the relentless influence of the West.

Nearly all Muslim reformist thinkers believe in enabling the Muslims to embrace modernity without surrendering Islam. Among those highlighted in the book are: to distinguish religion and *Shari'ah* from *fiqh*; to differentiate between Islam's fundamental sources of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* and their interpretations by generations of religious scholars to identify personal factors that may have influenced that interpretations; to emphasize rights over duties and create a rights-based Islam; to distinguish between the Islamic injunctions that are eternal and immutable and those that are clearly bound by time and space such as gender rights; to adapt through *ijtihad*, Islamic injunctions to Muslim societies' new circumstances and needs; to break the stranglehold of official clergy on the interpretation of Islamic sources and to encourage a critical and rational approach to the study of Islamic sources as well as to foreign ideas and philosophies (pp.290-291).

The authors underscore that the differences among reformist thinkers are due to differences in the national and regional contexts within which they are operating and to which they are responding. These differences are also due to the varying emphasis put on Islam and modernity such as Mohammed Arkoun and Abdolkarim Soroush in the Maghreb that fall into the category of Muslim secularists rather than reformists. In addition, the reformist thinkers disagree on the economic systems. In Iran and Egypt, many reformists believe in a mixed economy that is an example of influence of leftist ideas on Muslim intellectuals. Reform of Islamic penal code and inheritance laws provide the most significant differences among the reformist thinkers. Some advocate the elimination of all laws considered discriminatory whereas some support the suspension of these laws and gradual process of revision. As to women's rights, some favour complete equality, some emphasize women's role within the family while others recognize their right to take part in their societies' social and political life (p.293).

The book also pertinently articulates causes of the failure of reformist discourse even though this discourse extends over many

countries. As pointed out by Hunter, the principal reasons include the interruption of the normal processes of political evolution in key Muslim countries because of war and intense external competition to determine the trajectory of Muslim countries' socio-economic and political-cultural evolutions. Rapid modernization with the emergence of secular modernizing governments which believed in modernization with strong authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies also contribute to the lack of success of the reformist discourse on Islam. There is also the bureaucratization of religious establishments in most Muslim countries with the government's pandering to conservative Islam in exchange for political quietism. Furthermore, reformist Islamic discourse does not garner an adequate audience because of its complexity and emphasis on continued questioning and critique with tolerance for diverse opinion and open debate. In addition, Muslim reformers are also disliked and are subject to suspicion and animosity by secular, conservative and radical Muslims due to the relation of reformist Islamic discourse with power. Apart from that, there is also the lack of cohesiveness and adequate organization among reformists particularly due to the repressive nature of most Muslim regimes. For instance, the reformist Islam-based party *al-Badil al-Hadri* in Morocco which was legally allowed to take part in political activities was banned in February 2008 and its leader, Mustapha Moatasim, was arrested by the Moroccan authorities on the charge that he had links with al-Qaeda (p.295).

Credit should be given to Hunter for successfully assembling the contributors of the book and documenting the Islamic reformism to be reflected on by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Nonetheless, the title of the book, *Reformist voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and modernity* poses a question mark whether it is Islam that is to be mediated with modernity or vice versa. The answer can be discovered by gleaning through the chapters of the book and additional knowledge about Islam will be useful for taking a fascinating journey throughout the book.
