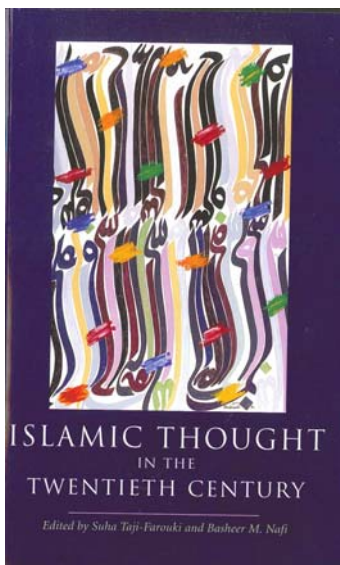




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century

Edited by **Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M Nafi**

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Challenging prevalent misconceptions and over-simplifications, this unique volume offers the reader several in-depth discussions of modern Islamic thinkers and thought. Highlighting the effects of dramatic social and political change beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, the ten contributors, all experts in their fields, provide contextual grounding and lucid analysis on issues ranging from democracy and pluralism to the gender debate and perceptions of the West. Throughout the volume, ruptures with tradition as well as continuities are identified and explored, and the sheer diversity of intellectual output in the twentieth century, both over time and space, is brought to the fore. The emphasis on Muslim self-expression, as opposed to restricted classifications by outside forces, provides valuable insights into perspectives too often ignored.



Comprised of an introduction and ten independent yet interlinked chapters, *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* represents an attempt to explore in detail some of the most salient features of modern discourse(s) within the Muslim world, situating it/them within its intellectual, social and political milieu.

The significant ruptures and developments at the end of the nineteenth century, including mass migration and urbanization, nascent nationalism, industrialization and technological advances which render the twentieth century a time of unprecedented change, are some of the reasons for undertaking such a study. By way of example, between 1900 and 1980, Cairo saw its population rise from 600,000 to eight million (it is now over 15 million) and levels of urban dwellers jumped from 10% to almost 50%. Clearly, these new conditions brought about by modernity, the effects of which were often considered “alien and enforced” (p. 2), attest to the dawn of a new age bearing little resemblance to the pre-modern period and requiring the budding generation of Muslim thinkers to respond to the challenges at hand.

The editors identify three major themes that run through the book. Contemplation of these is essential to approaching Islamic thought in the twentieth century. The first relates to the formation of new spokespersons for Islam, as the traditional monopoly enjoyed by the *ulama* was gradually eroded by increased literacy, ascending power of the state and the perceived irrelevance of their work to rapidly changing circumstances. It is noted that the “vast majority of illustrative Islamist political leaders and influential Muslim

intellectuals in the twentieth century are of non-ulamatic background” (p. 7). The *ulama*, however, were by no means dismantled as an institution as they proved able to adapt and reconstitute themselves in subsequent years.

The second theme is that of the marked diversity of Islamic thought in the twentieth century “to the point of complete fragmentation” (p. 8), which is in some ways a corollary of the first theme. No longer restricted to a narrow elite, new spokespersons were able to deal directly with complex social changes experienced by their particular societies, which inevitably lead to divergent opinions on an abundance of novel topics. The final theme is that of the interconnections and disconnections between Islamic thought and the rest of the global intellectual arena. Whereas many Muslim intellectuals readily embraced ideas and concepts born in the West, such as nationalism, memories of imperialist domination did not fade away. The editors highlight these tensions, noting “as much as the West is admired and internalised, it is vilified and consciously rejected” (p. 13).

The essays that form this volume pick up on these themes and add substantive weight to the analytical framework laid out in the introduction.

Guiding Questions:

1. What are some of the major developments of the twentieth century that have impacted the articulation of Islamic thought?
2. Has such diversity in Islamic thought always existed and is there anything qualitatively distinct about the diversity of twentieth century output?
3. Do you think that Islamic thought in this period was principally a reaction to the challenges of the ‘West’ and ‘modernity’?



Upheaval and Reform: Dialectics of Debate and Diversity of Discourse

Basheer Nafi's opening chapter surveys the emergence of the Islamic reformist movement and examines the challenges it posed to traditional conceptions of Islam. He identifies three key categories of issues: i) approach towards the Quran and Hadith, ii) dealing with the current living conditions of Muslims and iii) the challenge of the West, encompassing both the internal and external elements that informed the debate. These pioneer Muslim reformists allowed for the flourishing of a new idiom of Islamic thought, one both "comprehensible to the ordinary man and capable of carrying the novel ... concepts of modern times" (p. 48).

Although unable to put forward a coherent political vision, these reformists were successful in "affirming the relevance of Islam to modern times" (p. 51), and thus helped to blaze a trail along which subsequent political Islamists would walk. Considering this relationship between the Islamic reformist movement and the more radical political Islam, Nafi acknowledges that the latter emerged from the "intellectual crucible" of the former, but that the relationship was certainly not "mechanical" (p.53). A complex relationship between the two is hypothesised, one which defies easy and simplistic categorizations.

William Shepard's contribution to the volume takes the form of a particularly useful typology, aimed at scrutinizing the terminology so easily deployed but not readily understood. Three broad groupings are identified:



Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey. © Richard Goffin, www.archnet.org

secular, Islamist and traditionalist, and each grouping is assessed in terms of its attitude towards modernity. Interestingly, many secular currents, such as Ataturk's *Kemalism* (*Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) is regarded as the founder of Modern Turkey. His programme of modernization was inspired by his secular ideology, which sought to dismantle or subordinate the religious institutions that held sway under the Ottoman Sultans. See Azim Nanji, Dictionary of Islam (Penguin Books, London: 2008) p. 128*), are seen not to have sought to banish Islam from state and society, but rather to subordinate it to serve a more nationalist platform. On the other hand, Islamists, ranging from Muhammad Abduh (see text box 1) to Sayyid Qutb (see text box 2), viewed what they perceived as 'true Islam' as the solution to the Muslim world's

Two of the pioneers of the Islamic reform movement, Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) played central roles in seeking to reconcile the tenets of Islam with the changing realities of the nineteenth century. Al-Afghani travelled widely as an anti-Imperialist political agitator and an advocate of a pan-Islamic polity, whose philosophical view of Islam angered many traditionalists. His most prominent disciple, Muhammad Abduh was able to develop and apply Al-Afghani's ideas in his position as the Grand Mufti of Egypt. These two nineteenth century thinkers opened the flood-gates for the new generation of spokespersons in the twentieth century; some would espouse and adapt their ideas, whilst others would take a radical turn in the face of the profound social and political upheaval. See Nanji, pp. 88-89 & 123.

Text Box 1



Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) is seen by many as the father of fundamentalist political Islam, and during his lifetime was a harsh critic of the state of Islamic societies. Qutb declared them to be in a state of *jahiliyya* (referring to the period of ignorance in pre-Islamic Arabia), stipulating the rejection of secularism and other modern innovations and a return to the sovereignty of God to salvage the *ummah*. His radical views represented a rupture with the gradualist approach taken by the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hassan al-Banna), and reflected growing unease with the prevalent powers and ideologies. Though unable to stir the masses in his own time (he was ultimately executed), his ideas greatly influenced the next generation of radical Islamists. See Nanji, pp. 163-164.

Text Box 2

predicament as a total system perfectly suited to the needs of modern Muslim communities. However, traditionalists such as the Taliban and more isolationist Sufi tariqas, did not view modernity as a priority, choosing to focus on traditional forms of practice and inherited customs.

Within these groupings, further nuance is added through a discussion of divergent currents from within. An important distinction is highlighted between more apologetic Islamist thinkers, seeking to prove Islam's compatibility with Western notions of modernity, and those of a more radical disposition who did not seek any external yardsticks whatsoever. Shepard also incorporates a consideration of the time periods associated with the rise and decline of various strands and sub-strands into his narrative; he points to the 1967 Six-Day War (*known as 'al-naksa' (the setback) in Arabic, this war between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours was seen as a humiliating defeat for Arab Nationalism and led to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula*), the West's declining moral hegemony and a growing inclination from the educated

masses towards traditional Muslim concerns as crucial factors in the fall of secular ideologies and the rise of increasingly radical Islamist interpretations.

In addition to detailing the enormous diversity of thought, perhaps one of the most important points made is just how 'modern' a phenomenon radical Islamism is. Although often judged by outsiders as medieval, the strength of such currents, according to Shepard, lies in its "combination of modernity with a ... claim to Islamic authenticity", thereby embracing modernity "without being Western" (p. 80).

Yet, if some movements have seen themselves marginalized over the course of the twentieth century, **Elizabeth Sirriyeh** is able to show, through her analysis of Sufi thought, how they are in turn able to adapt and engage in a profound process of reconstruction. She opens the chapter with a statement that would surprise many today: "In 1900 the vast majority of Muslims understood Islam as mediated to them ... by Sufi shaykhs and traditional ulama who accepted Sufism as the inner, spiritual dimension at the heart of Islam" (p. 104). With the onslaught of scientific education, expansion of the secular state (Ataturk was particularly distrustful of Sufism) as well as the rise of puritanical interpretations of Islam, such as Wahhabism, one could have been excused for thinking that Sufism's future was far from assured.

Nevertheless, in all areas of the Muslim world, a revival was witnessed owing primarily to Sufi thinkers'



adaptability and willingness to take on ideas external to Sufism. A prominent example is the Indian philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal, whose fusion of “philosophical Sufism and modern European philosophy [constituted] an adventurous and original effort to address the problems of Muslim adjustment to modernity” (p. 119). Such changes, though, were not acceptable to more traditionally minded Sufis, which leads Sirriyeh to ponder the future sustainability of both traditional and reconstituted Sufism in the years ahead.

New Times, New Challenges, New Ideas: Nationalism, Democracy, Economy and Gender

The new spokespersons for Islam were of course forced to engage with some of the century’s most prominent ideas and ideologies, not least of which was nationalism. **Ralf Cury**’s chapter explores this issue and he asserts that “The role of the nation-state and of nationalism has been central to the modern history of the Islamic World” (p. 128) from Nasser’s secular Egypt to Khomeini’s Islamic Republic, issues of national identity were always close to the forefront. Nevertheless, Cury notes that many have been quick to dismiss the effect and importance of nationalism during this period and he identifies two main reasons for this.

Firstly, the legacy of orientalist scholarship has led either to a view of an essentialized Islam as an eternally constituted whole somehow not influenced by nationalist tendencies, or as an “eternally constituted mosaic” (p. 163) whose inherent tribalism and disjointed nature do not permit the social cohesion required for the



Al-Azhar Park, Central Promenade. © Aga Khan Trust for Culture

formation (or construction) of a nation. Secondly, many contemporary Islamists vehemently reject nationalism and other Western ideas as “imported ideologies that threaten the cultural essence of Islamic societies” (p. 143). Rejecting these reductionist approaches, the author affirms the continuing relevance of nationalism and implores the academic community to look into its evolving relationship with Islamist discourses.

On the question of democracy and state, **Abdelwahab El-Affendi** argues that it constitutes one of the most important issues that the Muslim world has faced in recent times. Raising some of the central events in the early twentieth century, such as the Iranian constitutional revolution, the Young Turk revolution and the abolition of the Caliphate, El-Affendi sketches the contours of the wider debate, always mindful of the changing realities on the ground informing its development. From the gradualist approach espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood (*A movement founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna to oppose British rule and made into a political party subsequently banned by the state. Its branches have spread beyond Egypt’s borders. See Nanji, p. 127*) to the more radical ideas of Sayyid Qutb, the diversity across the spectrum is what stands out, but more importantly



it is contextualized according to the specific dynamics and forces at play.

Despite the doubts and reservations that many may hold with regard to the integrity of contemporary manifestations of Islamic economics, **Rodney Wilson** roots the movement to develop an Islamic system of economics in the quest of pioneers like Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (see text box 1) to transform Islam from a religious faith into a politico-religious ideology. As a reaction to profound and entrenched inequalities, an attempt was made to fuse Islamic values with the necessary technical expertise, often acquired by Muslim thinkers in Western universities. Not occurring in a vacuum, this form of Islamic economics sought to define itself in opposition to the dominant ideologies of the time; capitalism was seen as too individualist and without moderation whilst communism was perceived as devoid of morality.

This search for an authentic application of an economic system in conformity with the *shariah* also spurred the movement for a response to the drastic human consequences of inequality. Organizations such as the Islamic Development Bank and the Grameen Bank (see text box 3) can trace their origins back to this fruitful period in Islamic thought.

Hibba Abugideiri's chapter on gender and the family lays out a major critique of twentieth century discourse on the subject. By seeing the woman principally as a 'relational' being, that is as a wife, mother, daughter etc. rather than a person in her own right, the consequences of such prioritization

occur "at the expense of woman's spiritual and legal rights" (p. 223). Such a categorization, which does not permit the changing of such narrowly defined roles, is perhaps unsurprising due the fact that "much of the Islamic interpretive process has historically been a male preserve" (p. 224), which would necessarily put women's viewpoints at a disadvantage.

Nevertheless, exceptions are identified, most notably in the work of Muhammad Abduh (see text box 1), whose emphasis on *tawhid* placed men and women in a position of equality in their duties as vicegerents of God. It is from this perspective, that is drawing from the Quran itself and not ideas perceived as imported or unauthentic, that one is able to insist on spiritual equality between man and woman, and not subordinate the implied rights to a constructed, albeit prevalent, relational notion of the woman.

Seeking to give practical expression to Islamic principles in the financial sector, the Islamic Development Bank was set up by several Muslim countries to provide financial support to development projects in the Muslim world. Another initiative, the Grameen Bank founded by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, also seeks to complement ideas with action, as it strives to empower those traditionally marginalized communities. The results of the fruitful meeting between religious ethics and economic theory are thus channelled in the service of humanity, improving living conditions in a sustainable and equitable manner. See Nanji, pp. 58 & 83.

Text Box 3

Reconstituting the 'Other': Changing Perceptions of the West, Christians and Jews

The final three chapters of the volume shift the focus towards Muslim thinkers' perceptions of non-Muslim



communities, either inside or outside the Muslim world .

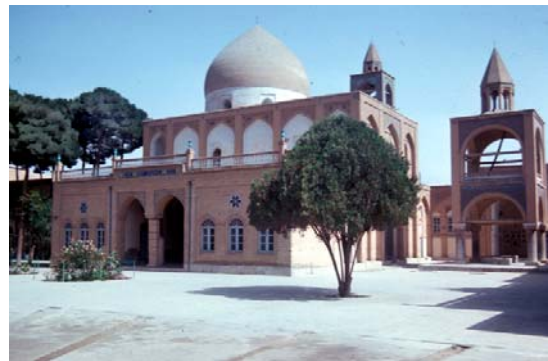
In terms of the West, **Jacques Waardenberg** notes that since perceptions have always been based on the particular political and economic relations of the time, the result has been the construction of many “different ‘Wests’” (p. 263). Furthermore, the nature of this perception has also been contingent on how the thinker himself or herself identifies with Islam; one can see quite different approaches taken by the religious thinker Rashid Rida (1865-1935 was a student of Muhammad Abduh and a prominent exponent of the Sunni reform movement, blending his call to reopen the gates of *ijtihad* (reasoning) to deal with the issues confronting Muslim societies with an Arab Nationalist outlook. See Nanji, p. 153.) and the more secular minded Taha Hussein (1889-1973 was known as the ‘Dean of Arabic Literature’ and a secular proponent of Egyptian Nationalism. He aroused the anger of religious institutions with some of his commentary on the Quran and Islamic history.).

Of the many ways in which the West was viewed, the most prominent were as part of an orient-occident dichotomy, whether in terms of the politics of colonialism and post-colonialism, or through the prism of modernity or even as the absolute antithesis of a just Islamic society. The need is clear to examine these relations from the Muslim angle and to appreciate the nature and extent of grievances in order to foster more equitable relations.

Moving on to Christianity - whose adherents, together with the world’s Muslims, form one third to one half of all the human beings on Earth today - **Hugh Goddard** covers a relationship which has been of the utmost significance to world history.

Nevertheless, the relationship has often been grossly simplified by equating Islam with the East and Christianity with the West, despite the fact that Christianity’s history in the Middle East predates that of Islam and there remain significant communities of Christians in what is known as the Muslim world, not to mention the sizeable Muslim communities in the West. However, it seems that in the face of more strident secularism, a significant process of inter-faith dialogue has helped to establish a united front, thus highlighting prospects for cooperation.

In the twentieth century, attitudes towards the notion of *dhimmi* (the *dhimmi* were non-Muslim communities protected under Islamic rule, free to practise their faith, in exchange for the payment of a tax. See Nanji, p. 9) communities in classical Islam are seen to vary between those who seek to keep the institution intact, albeit modified, and those who believe it is no longer suited to the realities of Muslim societies. In reference to Egypt’s Coptic Christians, one prominent Muslim thinker insists that they are not to be seen as *dhimmis* but rather as fellow citizens. By way of assessment, Goddard notes that although new thinking has not abounded on strict theological matters relating Christian doctrine and belief, increased exposure to, and interaction with, Christians as



All Saviour's Cathedral, Isfahan, Iran. © Aga Khan Visual Archive, MIT



people and communities has led to significant progress “in the arena of inter-religious dialogue” (p. 313). Such developments on the human level, taken in the spirit of *convivencia* (*Convivencia refers to the ‘coexistence’ of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in medieval Spain and by extension the cultural interaction and exchange fostered by such proximity. The term first appeared as part of a controversial thesis about Spanish historical identity advanced by Américo Castro in 1948. “Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea” by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, Pomona College, December 2008.*), may even represent the harbinger of more profound change in years to come.

Suha Taji-Farouki’s final chapter sets “the defining context for discussion of Muslim thinking on the Jews in the twentieth century...[as] the Zionist project and the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine” (p. 318). Substantial fissures were thus created between the current and the pre-modern, yet much of that was overlooked in pursuit of an “influential Islamic meta-narrative” (p. 318). By drawing anachronistic similarities between past and present, some even went as far as to label a seventh century Jewish convert to Islam, whose intentions were questioned, as being the first Zionist. A context specific analysis of conflicts between the nascent Muslim community and the nearby Jewish clans was thus subordinated to the formation of “transcendent and universally relevant exegetical archetypes, which could be applied to make sense of the twentieth-century Muslim encounter with Jews” (p. 326).

If such tendencies are apparent in some Muslim thinkers’ work, they also prevail in the views of many other academics, who posit anti-Judaism as an inbuilt characteristic of Islam across the ages. Taji-Farouki criticizes this

postulation, stressing that the “qualitatively distinct” nature of current anti-Jewish rhetoric “cannot be overemphasized” (p. 334). Falling in the trap of drawing such parallels is warned against, even if the protagonists themselves accept their validity, and a deeper appreciation of contextual realities is deemed necessary to truly understand the source of conflict.

Conclusion

Though taking the form of a collection of separate essays, the editors have succeeded in ensuring thematic integrity whilst allowing each of the authors to delve into debates surrounding their respective fields. The three themes outlined in the editors’ opening chapter guide the reader through what could otherwise be a confusing intellectual labyrinth. Having examined the book as a whole, it is perhaps most useful to end with a contemplation on the quote with which the editors chose to preface the book: “Nothing that has a history can be defined ‘– Friedrich Nietzsche” (p. v). These words are instructive as to the undergirding approach of the book: rather than seeking to cast Islamic discourse in stone, they are wholly cognisant of the disparate and complex forces at play, both internal and external, in response to which Muslim reactions are articulated and “chart a meaningful way between an ever-persisting past, and an ever-changing reality” (p. 3).

“...the breadth and depth of this work make it a most suitable purchase for anyone even slightly involved with any of the many debates raging within the Islamic world at the start of the 21st century.”

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Passages of Interest

The Advent of Modernity

Questions:

1. What has the impact of modernity been on Muslim thinking? Where is there continuity with traditional thinking and where do you see change?
2. What are some of the main challenges the modern period has brought to the Muslim world? How have some of these challenges been faced by Muslim communities?
3. There are those who say that Islam must be modernized, or modernity must be Islamized; how do you see the relationship between the two and do you think these are the only two options that exist?
4. Do you see Islam and modernity as unified realities, or do you view them as more disparate and fluid phenomena?

Relevant Passages:

“Yet modernity was never triumphant in the Muslim world; while the new became irreversibly integrated into Muslim realities, it could not totally obliterate the old and the traditional.” (p. 3)

“The modern Islamist intellectuals and political activists, graduates of the universities of Cairo, Istanbul, Aligarh and Algiers, as well as of London and Paris, speak for Islam using novel idioms and discourses, expressing new concerns and preoccupations, and crystallizing the contradictions of modernity while they reflect the ruptures it has brought with Islamic intellectual traditions.” (p. 7)

“First, rather than being a development within cultural traditions that is internally generated, twentieth-century

Islamic thought is constitutively responsive; it is substantially a reaction to extrinsic challenges.” (p. 9)

Discussion:

Witnessing the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of several nation-states in its place, much of the Middle East in the twentieth century faced serious challenges and profound demographic shifts. Such ruptures would inevitably threaten the institutions of traditional Islam, and the phenomenon of modernity, which was credited with or blamed for such changes, had to be assessed in terms of Islam. Some embraced the fruits of modernity, others rejected it root and branch whilst a few attempted to carefully navigate this turbulent ideological ocean. Yet, perhaps the binary of abstracts, modernity and Islam, is not the most useful way to approach this new reality; a more nuanced view of a diverse range of ‘constitutively responsive’ answers, informed by context, interests and outlook, better enables us to reach an understanding of this complex and troubling time.

Defining Islam and its Role

Questions:

1. If much of twentieth century Islamic thought is constructed in response to its contextual realities, what is Islamic about it? If every thinker interprets and projects Islam in his or her own way, does this undermine the idea of the unity of Islam?
2. How do ideas prominent in the twentieth century such as nationalism and secularism interact with Islam? What role has Islam played in this time period in Muslim majority communities?



3. What is the relationship between the *sacred* and *reason* in society. How have thinkers approached this relationship in dealing with the twentieth century realities of the Muslim world?

Relevant Passages:

“In many respects, therefore, what is ‘Islamic’ in modern Islamic thought is largely a construct, a construct in which a complex nexus of forces and cognitions are at play in the context of modernity, and which defies easy labels and definitions.” (p. 3)

“The religion of the majority in the Islamic world is Islam but this does not mean that Islamic societies are constituted by an Islamic essence that has been everywhere decisive and the same.” (p. 147)

“...twentieth-century Islamic thought reflects a continuous intellectual struggle to define the place of the sacred and the place of human reason, to decipher the implications engendered by identifying with Islam in a world characterised by a fractured, multi-dimensional sense of identity, and to chart a meaningful way between an ever-persisting past, and an ever-changing reality.” (p.3)

Discussion:

Once more, a shift in focus from the abstract (Islam) to the individual mind that forms the idea, shaped by circumstance, society and a host of other forces, allows us up adopt an approach that appreciates the inherent diversity in Islamic thought but in no way undermines ideals such as Islamic unity. Such an approach permits the study of the way in which Islamic thought

interacts, be it in a welcoming or hostile manner, with the multitude of other ideologies prominent in the region at the time. Easy answers and reductionist labels are thus eschewed in favour of a more detailed examination of some of the key questions raised.

Orient and Occident

Questions:

1. How useful are concepts such as East and West in understanding the issues raised in the book? Do they exist in and of themselves or are they imagined, time-bound and constructed in opposition to one another?
2. How have some Islamic thinkers tried to push aside questions such as gender equality on the basis of ‘un-Islamicness’ and how have others tried to make religious justifications for promoting them?
3. Why is it that the West and the East have come to be associated with Christianity and Islam respectively, when the historical record and current demographics show otherwise? How do Christian communities in the Middle East and Muslim communities in Europe affect our perception of this dichotomy?

Relevant Passages:

“...in most Muslim discourse the West is a construct, just as the East is a construct in most Western discourse.” (p. 266)

“In sum, modernity, postcoloniality, globalization and Western cultural hegemony have all served as pretexts for the reinscribing of traditional notions of family, and thus women’s roles, within Islamic thought.” (pp. 246-247)

“The Christians of the Middle East, whose history goes back to before the



coming of Islam ... often feel that their presence in the Middle East is increasingly resented, and in Western Europe Muslims sometimes feel that their presence is increasingly just tolerated rather than appreciated.” (p. 297)

Discussion:

The persistence of the East-West dichotomy is an issue that has attracted much scholarly attention over the years. In terms of popular perceptions, perhaps it has survived so long since both sides of the constructed divide have seized upon it in the formulation of an explanatory ‘meta-narrative’, which is able to both demonize the perceived other and eulogize the perceived self. Nevertheless, such an approach is undermined by both historical and novel realities, as well as by growing criticisms from within (e.g. women’s groups in the Middle East or European Muslims) that expose the assumptions of the discourse and demonstrate that its proponents are representative not of the totality of their own society, but solely of their own interests.

Further Readings

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“In the final analysis, no nation, no race, no individual has a monopoly of intelligence or virtue. If we are to pursue the ideal of meritocracy in human endeavour, then its most perfect form will grow out of a respect for human pluralism, so that we can harness the very best contributions from whomever and wherever they may come.”

His Highness the Aga Khan
Graduation Ceremony-University of Alberta
9th June 2009