

Book Reviews

Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam: A Reader

Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, eds.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 382 pages.

The two editors of this volume have successfully pooled their expertise in sociology, politics, and modern Islam to bring together a cogent and well-organized reader of key texts depicting the self-statements of what may be tentatively called Islamic “modernism” and “fundamentalism.” The selection of 34 articles and treatises (18 on modernism, 16 on fundamentalism) is preceded by a scholarly introduction that also contains short biographies of the writers represented in this volume.

For the purpose of organizing this anthology, the editors chose to highlight what they describe as two “episodes” in modern Islam: the powerful wave of Islamic modernism that arose in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries, and the perhaps more powerful wave of Islamic fundamentalism that arose from the 1930s onward. This semi-chronological division of two sociocultural and ideological waves is to be taken not as a representation of rigid categories, but merely as an heuristic device meant to focus the reader’s attention on the contrasts and differences between them. The editors are aware that the designations “modernism” and “fundamentalism” are ideal types, that the distinction between them begins to weaken as one closely examines their particular and concrete manifestations, and that one type may develop traits or characteristics of the other, given appropriate social circumstances.

As ideal types, however, the editors believe that Islamic modernism and fundamentalism may be identified on the basis of positions taken by specific intellectuals or ideologues on five central and “historically significant” issues: jurisprudence, politics, western civilization, gender, and lifestyle. Consequently, these are the categories according to which they

have organized the numerous self-statements of Islamic modernism and fundamentalism contained in this anthology.

As a cautionary note, it may be pointed out that contemporary Islamic thought is not as strictly dualistic or dichotomous as this book's arrangement might suggest to the uninformed reader. Points of contact, overlap, and mutual borrowing abound. For instance, the works of both Abul A`la Maududi and Ali Shariati, who have been placed in the "fundamentalist" camp by Moaddel and Talattof, contain significant currents that can only be described as "modernist." Indeed, many so-called "fundamentalist" ideologues of the twentieth century have been denounced for being too conservative and traditional, as well as for being too modern and liberal. In effect, instead of viewing individual thinkers as belonging strictly to just one camp, each of their particular views needs to be located along a broad spectrum of opinions, the extreme ends of which should be seen only as pedagogical constructions. In other words, the "modernist" and "fundamentalist" divide, while useful for the purpose of this and other anthologies, should be taken with more than a grain of salt.

Like all anthologies, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam* is limited by its working assumptions and its editors' area of interest and expertise.. With only a few exceptions, all of the selected authors belong to India, Egypt, and Iran. The section on Islamic modernism contains four selections from Sayyid Ahmad Khan, three from Moulavi Chiragh Ali, and two each from Amir Ali and Muhammad Abduh. In the section on Islamic fundamentalism, there are three selections each from Sayyid Abul A`la Maududi and Imam Ruhullah Khomeini. While all of these are certainly influential and perhaps representative scholars of their respective ideologies, and while India, Egypt, and Iran are definitely important centers of Islamic culture and thought, some readers may consider this approach as an unwelcome sign of a certain narrowness of scope. On the other hand, it also can be viewed as a more focused and concentrated approach that self-consciously avoids being too broad and, therefore, too general. Other writers included in this volume are Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Shibli Nu`mani, Ali Abd Al-Raziq, Farid Wajdi, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Jalal Al-i Ahmad, Murtaza Mutahhari, among others.

In contrast, the two anthologies by Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam* (1998) and *Modernist Islam* (2002), both published by the Oxford University Press, are much broader in scope in that they provide selections

from a wide variety of authors from different cultural and temporal contexts. These anthologies, of course, do not address themselves to “fundamentalist” interpretations and ideologies at all. The book under review, therefore, has the advantage of providing immediate contrasts, responses, or rejoinders to the modernist and liberal approaches, thereby giving a better overall picture of contemporary Islamic thought’s richness and diversity. For college and university courses that do not focus exclusively on modernist and liberal (or “progressive”) trends in Islam, Moaddel and Talattof’s book may be better suited than those edited by Kurzman. The latter’s *Liberal Islam*, however, should be used to fill the gap deliberately left by Moaddel and Talattof, since they do not include such contemporary modernists as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad Shahrour, and Abdul Karim Soroush.

One of the book’s important features is its emphasis on the social conditions within which a particular understanding of Islam is developed and articulated. To be sure, both the modernist and the fundamentalist appeal to the same Islamic texts and sacred sources as the foundation of their respective views of normative and prescriptive Islam. Not basing one’s arguments on these sources, or dismissing their validity and relevance, by definition excludes an intellectual or ideologue from being designated as “Islamic.” Once it is agreed that both sides will employ the same sacred texts, the origin of differences in emphasis and interpretation comes down to differences in the individual’s personal biography and his or her social context. Moaddel and Talattof’s anthology is not primarily a work in intellectual history, but rather a work that emphatically points out the relevance of each set of ideas to the socioeconomic, political, and cultural context within which it came to be developed and articulated. As such, it can be used as a guide to modern Islam’s social history rather than merely a history of ideas.

Having said this, however, it should be noted that while the importance of social conditions has been emphasized in the introduction to their anthology, the editors could have tremendously improved the value of their selections by providing relevant information about the unique socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts within which each of the writings was originally produced.

Ahmed Afzaal
Instructor, Department of Religious Studies
Lawrence University
Appleton, Wisconsin