

## **Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith**

*Michael Wolfe, ed. and the Producers of beliefnet  
USA: Rodale Inc. and Beliefnet, Inc., 2002. 240 pages.*

This book is divided into nine sections: an opening section with introductory essays, followed by eight chapters that discuss the writers' views on certain issues. Each section contains several essays of anywhere from between three to six pages. Given the number of authors, I will mention only some of the points made in each section.

In his introduction, Michael Wolfe lays out the book's general premise: Maybe it is time to stop looking to the "motherland" for our understandings of Islam and Islamic tradition. Maybe it is time to grow up. This call is sure to find a resonance among the many Muslims who are tired of imported imams and imported books that are so far removed from our own reality in the West. Farid Esack brings up an interesting point: Historically, Muslims have known only two paradigms: oppression (Makkah) and governing (Madinah). However, given current realities, they must adopt a third kind: peaceful coexistence in a state of equality, as done by those Muslims who emigrated to Abyssinia.

In "Violence," Khaled Abou El Fadl notes that Islam is concerned with building and creating, and that ruining and destroying life is "an ultimate act of blasphemy against God." He writes that war is defensive and a last resort, that trade and technology are preferred, and that political discourses have displaced moral discourses. Aasma Khan discusses her small group (Muslims against Terrorism), which was set up in the days following 9/11 to educate people "about the incompatibility of Islam with terrorist activities, hatred, and violence."

In "Democracy," Karen Armstrong reminds us of several important facts: modernity/democracy is a process; that in the Muslim world, modernity was imposed from above and has close ties with colonial subjugation/dependence, instead of independence; and that is imitation and not innovation. Religion, she asserts, can help people through the transition to modernity. Alex Kronemer states that "the greatest obstacle to democracy in the Muslim world is not 'Islam,' it is poverty, the lack of education, and corrupt and repressive regimes, many of which – and this is the important point – are supported by the democracies of the West." This raises the question of whether the West really wants democracy in the Muslim world

or not. Taha Jabir al-'Alwani, a *faqih*, says that Muslims need to see beyond *fiqh* and to embrace life with all of its gray areas. Islam summons Muslims to build a civilization, a community, with values, not a state. We can only hope that many other *fuqaha'* have a similar view.

"Women and Islam" discusses the problems faced by Muslim women: patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy, political repression, and exclusion. Leila Dabbagh recalls growing up in a house where the men were openly affectionate with their women, while Saraji Umm Zaid recalls her humiliations at being denied entrance into several mosques because they were "too small." One sometimes wonders why women even bother to remain Muslim when faced with such blatant stupidity and sexism. Her essay reminded me of a friend who left the Catholic church because she could not see herself in it. Maybe someone should research how many women have been driven away from Islam by suppressive patriarchal customs. Halima Touré's "You Seem So Intelligent. Why Are You a Muslim?" was my favorite article. It reminded me of my mother's first question upon learning that I had become a Muslim: "Why are you adopting the religion of the stupidest people in the world?" I am sure that many converts will be able to relate to her experiences.

"The African-American Experience" deals with the immigrant Muslim community's lack of significant contact with the indigenous African-American Muslim community. Precious Rasheeda Muhammad reminds us of the Prophet's view on slavery and race relations, and says that immigrant Muslims have a lot to learn from African-American Muslims, for the community's post-9/11 problems are nothing new to them. Akbar Muhammad mentions the help offered by Louis Farrakhan, W. D. Mohammad, and Imam Siraj Wahhaj in the aftermath of 9/11. F. Thaufeer al-Deen discusses life for Muslims in prison, while Deborah Caldwell reflects upon Muhammad Ali's role as the "human face" of Islam in the United States.

In "Muslims, Christians, and Jews," Kabir Helminski talks of Islam with a small *i*. In other words, Islam is not so much the religion "Islam" as we know it, but a lifestyle that reflects tolerance and gentleness, and is "just one possible manifestation of humanity's primordial religion." Wolfe, explaining how Muslims view Jesus, writes that Jesus came to "complement the legalism of the Torah with a leavening compassion rarely expressed in the older testament." Hesham A. Hassaballa explains why he supports Moses and the Children of Israel in "The Ten Commandments," and Mas'ood Cajee recalls his childhood Jewish friends

and says that peace will come only when religious Jews and religious Muslims make peace with each other.

In "Culture," Helminski explains why Americans love Rumi: He is the voice of God's unconditional love for humanity. Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore calls upon the American Muslim community to reject Wahhabism and "to forge for ourselves a new vivacity of Islamic life within the parameters of what is permissible (*halal*)." Yusuf Islam recounts how the war in Bosnia made him change his views on music (the need for a cultural offensive to fight the West's cultural invasion, and how *nasha'id* inspired the Bosnian army and nation). Kamal al-Marayati discusses how communities can become more familiar with each other through comedy and humor.

In "Practicing Vibrant Islam in America," Michael Wolfe relates how the mosque's role in this country has changed over time and now provides services that are unheard of "back home." Yahiya Emerick says that we should forget about the "motherland" because it is "too bogged down in stupidity, corruption, nationalism, and racism." According to him, the most accurate version of Islam is here, where there are no cultural superstitions. Also, the tensions between the Salafis, modernists, and Sufis must be overcome in the quest for balance and living Islam.

The final section, "Why I Love Being Muslim," deals with the thoughts of Arsalan Tariq Iftikhar, Hakeem Olajuwon, Steven Barboza, and Mos Def on why Islam is important to them.

Overall, the book was an enjoyable and easy read. Hopefully, it will find a large audience among both Muslims and non-Muslims. And even more hopefully, it will encourage western Muslims to lessen their continued dependence upon the "motherland."

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