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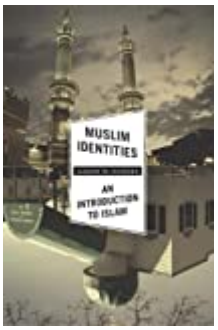

Aaron W. Hughes. *Muslim Identities: An Introduction to Islam.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xvi + 310 pp. $89.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16146-6; $29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-16147-3; ISBN 978-0-231-53192-4.

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A Different Approach to an Introduction to Islam

When writing a book about the history of Islam one usually decides which of the historiographic narratives to follow, and which to argue against. Readers are expected to follow the text and make their own choices, whether they agree or disagree with the narrative presented. In his recent book *Islamic Identities* Aaron Hughes takes a different approach.

The book consists of twelve chapters divided into four parts, organized chronologically and thematically. The book opens with a general introduction to the study of Islamic religion, discussing the prevailing concepts and narratives in the study of Islam as a religion and culture. The introduction presents the reader with the various possibilities and the sources at the basis of each narrative. It also presents the authorâs approach to the study of Islamic religion. As stated (and indeed carried out), he intends to âmaneuver between the overly critical approach and the apologetic approachâ (p. 1). Another point stressed in this chapter, and throughout the book, is the diversity prevailing in Islam; Hughes argues that there is no one single Islam or one way to practice Islam. This point is discussed from a somewhat different angle towards the end of the book; this time, he suggests that even Muslims cannot judge their coreligionists as to the authenticity of their Islam (particularly on the background of Islamophobia after the events of September 11 and the fear of association between Islam, violence, and terrorism).

The first part discusses the question of origins, in three chapters. The first deals with pre-Islamic Arabia, presenting the region in terms of existing religions and tribes, as well as presenting the traditional and the diverse academic narratives discussing the emergence of Islam and the context in which it emerged, and ending with a synthetic approach and comparing this situation to the state of research on other religions. Instead of inquiring about origins, Hughes suggests asking âhow and why did early Muslims come to write their own historyâ (pp. 36-37). The second chapter presents Muhammad, his biography, and the construction of his image in Islamic sources, particularly in the Hadith. The third and last chapter of this part discusses the Quran, the sacred

text of Islam. Hughes shifts between presenting attitudes toward the composition of the Quran (academic and traditional) and the bookâs position in the daily life of Muslims, past and present.

The second part, dealing with identities and formation, presents a later period, after the death of Muhammad and the formation of the Islamic caliphate and community. The fourth chapter presents the importance of relating to Islam as a diverse and dynamic religion and community. Hughes briefly discusses developments in various locations, mainly medieval but also adds the Ottoman Empire. While the discussion regarding each location is very short, nonetheless it serves to emphasize the pluralism of Islam and local interests and developments. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the formation of Shia sects (sects such as the Druze or the Bahai, which derive from Islam, are missing from the book), in terms of both historical context and in theological and actual differences from Sunni practices. Chapters 6 and 7 present the ulama (religious scholars) and their competitors, the Sufis and mystical orders.

The third part deals with beliefs and theological schools (chapter 8) and practices among Sunnis, Shiites, and popular Islam (chapter 9). The last part is entitled âModern Variationsâ and deals with Islamâs encounters with modernity. Hughes suggests an interesting analytic division of Islamic responses to modernity: fundamentalism (for example, the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brothers as the Sunni response, and Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini as illustrating the Shia reaction), modernism (Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal as Sunnis, with Fazlur Rahman and Abdolkarim Soroush as representatives of the Shia), and nationalism (Gamal Abd al-Nasser and Saddam Husein).[1] The following chapter (10) discusses the construction of Muslim womanhood, providing the traditional, Western, and Islamic feminist points of view regarding women, focusing on the case study of the veil. The next chapter is dedicated to the reaction of the world, and the Muslim world in particular, to the events of September 11. These reactions range from Islamophobia (with the example of Islam Watch), apologetics, and an internal critique of Islam by Muslims such as Irshad Manji, Tariq Ramadan, and other progressive Muslims. Here, as in other chapters, the author stresses the great diversity within Islam and the impossibility of defining âIslamâ or âbeing Muslim.â

While the book is coherent, and presents various aspects of Islamic religion and their developments in a sensitive and scholarly way, it could have benefited from a more thorough discussion regarding Muslims outside the Middle East, particularly Europe, but also North America (apart from the discussion regarding the reaction to September 11). Additionally, at times social context is not clear enough, particularly in chapter 6, where the social aspect of the schools of law is missing.[2]

There are many benefits to this book. One is that the chapters can stand alone, so that a person interested in a particular subject, is able to read just this part, with no need to read the entire book in order to understand each chapter. However, this benefit comes at the cost of neglecting long-term processes or (at times) explaining the interactions between various processes. For instance, the treatment of the principle of *naskh* is contextualized as part of the discourse regarding law, but not in the discourse regarding the Quran.

Muslim Identities is a welcome addition to the list of introductory books on Islamic religion.[3] The book provides insight into Islam as a culture and a religion. Someone interested in learning and becoming familiar with the basic terms, concepts, and figures of Islam will find the book illuminating and helpful. Since the audience is the nonprofessional, the book does not include diacritics, but uses the phonetic form of the word (Quran rather than QurâÄn, Muhammad rather than Muá¥ammad, etc.). The glossary at the end of the book does include diacritics, informing the reader of the precise form and script. The boxes in various places in the chapters provide a more in-depth look at issues or different periods. For instance, while chapter 8, âConstituting Identities,â discusses mainly medieval developments and theological movements, within the chapter the author imbeds extra information, such as a comparison between a medieval group (the Kharijites) with a contemporary group (al-Qaeda; p. 187). Also in the same chapter, the author brings some medieval discussions regarding the position of philosophy in three different boxes (pp. 190, 195, and 197); similarly in chapter 3, when dealing with the Quran on p. 71, Hughes adds information regarding the meaning of translating the Quran, and so on. These additions supply information and interrelations between periods and phenomena, thus adding to the diversity and dynamic points of view the author wishes to present.

Each chapter includes a âfurther readingâ list, thus enabling those wishing to broaden their knowledge to do so. Some of the books are mentioned in the chapter and the thesis or subject is stated. Readers interested in a short introduction to Islamic religion will find *Muslim Identities* a good start.

Notes

[1]. This division is somewhat different than is found in, for instance, Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Ruthven discusses this response as part of chapter 6, âJihad,â and mentions only reformists and modernists, making a clear distinction between religious scholars (reformists) and the Westernized elite (modernists).

[2]. Jonathan P. Burkeyâs *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003*)* provides a very different standpoint and discusses religious developments as part of a particular social context, thus dedicating much more space to contextualization.

[3]. To note just two other introductory books: Ignaz Goldziherâs *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) was written several decades ago and thus is very much outdated, lacking references to contemporary issues and developments within Islamic religion and community, as well as in research concerning Islam (for instance, the new approaches to Islamic law discussed by Wael Halaq). Another introductory book is the aforementioned Ruthven, *A Very Short Introduction.* While this book is far more updated, it seems to be a little one-sided when presenting contemporary issues and developments.