

Introducing Islam

William Shepard

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Introducing Islam is the result of the author's more than thirty years of teaching and research about Islam within the context of religious studies. This comprehensive and concise textbook is an ideal introduction to Islam that seeks to present it and its culture, as found within different Muslim countries, in a sympathetic way.

From its early environment and origins in the life and career of Muhammad (pbuh), it traces the history of Islam through its classical expressions and up to its contemporary interactions with the West. Devoting a chapter to each important topic (e.g., the Qur'an, Islamic law, Islamic theology and philosophy, and Sufism) and to studies of Islam in individual countries (e.g., Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Indonesia), it explores Islamic civilization through discussions of Islamic art and culture as well as community rituals. Consisting of a preface, an introduction, and three parts (divided into nineteen chapters [2-20]), the book is illustrated with ten maps and twenty-eight figures, text boxes, summary charts (key points), a glossary of key Arabic terms, and a list of further reading to aid students/readers' understanding.

The introductory chapter, "Introduction: Approaching the Subject," provides an appropriate approach to the subject and gives a synopsis of Islam. Part 1, "History of the Community" (chapters 2-4), presents an historical

overview of the pre-Islamic period, the Hellenistic-Iranian world, and of Islamic civilization from 700 to 1700 CE. Part 2, "Aspects of Islam" (chapters 5-14), analyzes the Islamic tradition as it developed over the centuries, usually with some attention given to modern developments at the end of each. These ten chapters deal, respectively, with the Qur'an; Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); rituals and ceremonies; divisions in the ummah, the various sects (Kharijis, Shi'is, and Sunnis); the ulama and their role; the Shari'ah and *fiqh*, Shi'is and Sunnis; Sunni legal schools; theology and philosophy; Sufism; and Ibn Sina (998-1057), al-Ghazzali (1058-1111), and Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1320). The first figure was the greatest classical Muslim philosopher; the second one was the scholar-mystic who did the most to integrate the various strands of Muslim thought, philosophy, theology, *fiqh*, and Sufism; and the third was a fearless reformer who inspires both reformers and radicals among Muslims today. The final chapter, "Culture and Counter-Culture: Literature and Other Arts," a selective overview of Islamic art, architecture, literature (prose and poetry) and music, argues that "artistic culture sometimes directly expresses religion, sometimes reacts against it or flouts it and sometimes does both" (p. 190).

Part 3, "Modern Developments" (chapters 15-20), deals with modernity with particular attention on Islam, politics (e.g., Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Indonesia), and disparate aspects of globalization. Chapter 15, "Modern Challenges: Western Imperialism and Muslim Response," traces the history of European colonialism/western imperialism from the beginning of the nineteenth century, which set off profound changes in Muslim societies, such as modernization, development, westernization, and secularization. All of these are discussed as a "spiritual as well as cultural and physical challenge to Muslims and to Islam" (p. 199). It also deals with "pre-modern reform," Muslim "responses to [all these] challenges, namely, traditionalism, Islamic modernism, secularism, and Islamism (sometimes referred to as "fundamentalism")." It closes with an explanation of Islam's resurgence, which began in 1970 and has involved many forms of Islamic expressions. Chapter 16, "Turkey: Secular Reform," analyzes Ottoman history, "Turkism," the nationalist and secularist republic established by Ataturk, and the Alevi revival. The author argues that the Turks have come to "accept both secularism and Islam," but are still trying to work out exactly "how to relate them" (p. 225).

Chapter 17, "Ideology and Politics in Egypt: Between Secularism and Islamism," concentrates on modernization and all *-isms* (e.g., secularism, nationalism, and Islamic modernism vis-à-vis Muhammad Abduh), the Muslim Brothers and Islamism, revolution, and Islam's resurgence. It argues that Islam's resurgence in Egypt "has definitely shifted the cultural bal-

ance away from secularism but has not produced an Islamic government” (p. 239). Chapter 18, “Ideology and Politics in Iran: From Secularism to Islamic Revolution,” outlines Iran’s history from the Qajars to the Pahlavis, from Iranian nationalism to the White Revolution, and from Islamic opposition to the Islamic revolution and the creation of Islamic Republic. Shepard remarks that this republic has survived for more than twenty-five years and that its combination of “radical Islamism and neo-traditionalism” has proven viable, if unattractive, to many (p. 254).

Chapter 19, “Indonesia: Islamic Society or Islamic State,” focuses on the Islamization of Java, Sumatra, and other islands; Dutch imperialism; continuing Islamization; independence; and the issue of an Islamic state. According to him, Indonesia has the reputation of being more “tolerant and flexible than most other Muslim countries” and, as a result, possibly no other Muslim country has produced as significant a group of “liberal Muslim intellectuals” as the Indonesian “neo-modernists” (p. 266). Chapter 20, “Globalization: Challenge and Opportunity,” reflects on globalization, global jihad, martyrdom operations, the Muslim diaspora in the West, and liberal/progressive Islam. Shepard sees the whole history of Islam as a “process of globalization” and the hajj as the greatest symbol and manifestation of Islam’s global tendency. In this chapter, he throws light on the views of those intellectuals who undertake “substantial reinterpretations of the Qur’an and Sunna and engage in radical forms of *ijtihad* and are particularly concerned with human rights, gender issues, and religious pluralism” (p. 288): Fazlur Rehman (1919-88), Amina Wadud (b. 1952), Nasr Abu Zayd (b. 1943), Abdulkarim Soroush (b. 1945), Abdullahi An-Na`im, and Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962). The chapter concludes that “globalization, like all other gifts of technology, has its good and bad aspects” and will make a “significant difference” for Islam and Muslims; but in the long run it is hard to say “what that difference will be” (p. 282).

In addition to using wide range of encyclopedias, anthologies, studies on Islamic civilization and history, and books on gender issues, the author has made “considerable use of the web,” particularly “Google and Wikipedia to great advantage,” but with care and caution (pp. 317-18). In various subtitles, it seems, there are a number of *borrowed* terms/phrases: “true Islam” (p. 3), “superpowers” (p. 13), “Pan-Islamic” (p. 218), and “Turkism” (p. 219). It is a pity that this book ends without a conclusion that could tie together the ideas and guidelines presented, especially those in the book’s final part. Besides, his overview of “philosophy” (chapter 11) needs to be lengthened considerably to do it justice, as is the case with “prose” (chapter 14).

Despite such shortcomings, however, the author deserves special appreciation for bringing to the forefront such an informative and comprehensive work on Islamic history and civilization. A remarkable and valuable contribution, not to mention an excellent source on Islam's history, culture, and modern trends, this book will prove useful to students and scholars alike.

NOTE: I have used this book in my introductory courses on Islam with great success (Mahdi Tourage, Book Review Editor).

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