

**Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the
Contemporary World**

Carl W. Ernst

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Following Muhammad is a scholarly, but not academic, book directed at the general reading public. Written by a religious studies scholar with an evident sympathy for Islam, it seeks to address western prejudices about

Islam by presenting a clear, concise, and accessible picture of the faith in context. Although the author explores Islam's historical evolution, his primary focus is to balance this with insights into how Muslims themselves understand their religion in contemporary as well as historical times. Although primarily directed toward non-Muslims, whose essentialist media-driven assumptions about Islam are constantly lamented by Ernst, it is also of interest to the Muslim reading public as a refreshing departure from standard accounts of Muslims and Islam. Although not a textbook, it could be profitably used as a text for discussion in a variety of courses.

Two key issues to which Ernst returns repeatedly are, first, the erroneous western tendency of assuming that fundamentalists are the "true" representatives of Islam, and, second, the importance of recognizing the part colonialism has played in shaping contemporary developments in the Muslim world. By drawing comparisons with Christianity, Judaism, and other faiths, he highlights the unacceptability – and indeed absurdity – of many generic assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Instead, he stresses the importance of non-Muslims recognizing the diversity of faith and practice in time and space that characterizes Islam, just as it does all other world religions.

The book is divided into six chapters organized in a thematic rather than a chronological manner in order to reflect the author's self-proclaimed emphasis on "rethinking" Islam today. Chapter 1 explores western perceptions of, and prejudices toward, Islam in modern and medieval times and suggests ways to avoid such prejudices in our own time. Chapter 2 looks at what is meant by the term religion and how evolving western definitions of religion have shaped western perceptions of other faiths, including Islam. This is counterbalanced by a survey of how Muslims have defined Islam by assessing its historical vocabulary and the vocabulary used by present-day Muslims.

Chapter 3 looks at Islam's sources: Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. Ernst avoids giving a standard biography and instead presents the Prophet as an exemplar through reference to his life story. He justifies his approach by drawing comparisons with the Buddha and Jesus as figures of faith as well as history. He compares and contrasts the Qur'an to other scriptures, pointing to its unique status as the Word of God, which is comparable not to the Bible but to Jesus, who is also described as the Word of God in the Christian tradition. This chapter both grants Islam its own unique character and places it within the context of world religions.

Chapter 4 investigates the development of Islamic ethics on the foundations provided by the Qur'an and the Hadith literature, and their elaboration through interaction with other traditions, including Greek philosophy. Key here is Ernst's point that, in fact, both western and Islamic civilizations rest on the same foundations: Semitic prophetic revelation and Greek philosophical knowledge. It also looks at the impact of colonialism upon Islamic ethics and how Muslims have responded to the founding of modern nation-states, the rise of science, and such other issues as gender equality. Chapter 5 looks at Islamic spirituality in the form of Sufism and Shi'i spirituality and discusses Islamic art and the value of such a designation. In the concluding chapter, Ernst gives his view of how Islam might be reimagined in the twenty-first century to create a dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims and disempower those on both sides who wish to promote the idea of a clash of civilizations.

The book is well-written and lucid. Although the organization of contents appears idiosyncratic at first glance, the book's narrative flow is generally masterful. Ernst successfully moves from present to past and back again in a manner that is both logical and clear to follow. The only section where this breaks down slightly is in his discussion of Islamic art, which sits rather uncomfortably in the chapter on spirituality.

In many ways, *Following Muhammad* is a highly personal work. It does not seek to present ground-breaking research or proffer original material to experts in Islamic studies. However, it is an elegant and masterful presentation of a religious tradition in an accessible manner, as well as a heartfelt plea for non-Muslims to understand it. It is clearly based on great erudition and knowledge not just of Islam, but also of other faiths. This makes it possible for Ernst to offer new perspectives for non-Muslims and illustrate the naïvety of making monolithic assumptions about millions of people. He successfully brings Islam into the fold of world religions while also maintaining the specificity and diversity of Muslim praxis. *Following Muhammad* is a worthy contribution to the field of contemporary commentaries on what Islam is and an original introduction to that faith for non-Muslims.

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