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Islamic Perspectives on the New Millennium

Edited by: V. Hooker and A. Saikal

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Islamic Perspectives on the New Millennium, edited by V. Hooker and A. Saikal, is a compilation of short pieces purposefully standing in contrast to each other to reflect the diversity that is inherent in an Islamic understanding of world affairs and modern life. Highlighting different but equally strong anxieties over the Bush administration, warfare, and state intrusion into the private lives of both non-Muslims and Muslims, the collection is an important contribution that introduces Muslim views to Western audiences that are largely unaware of these views.

Hooker and Saikal begin by discussing the widely-shared concern about the current damaged relations between Muslims and Non-Muslims worldwide. Hooker identifies the problem as a common misperception of Islam by non-Muslims in the West. He maintains that this misperception must be replaced by a dynamic, liberal version of Islam—one that encompasses a wide range of various attitudes, beliefs and orientations. The closing chapter summarises a list of prominent books discussing the characteristic of the new liberal Islam. These books illustrate what an enormous internal challenge liberal Islam means for Muslims. The final emphasis is on the diversity within Islam which has been long perceived as a homogeneous single source of evil by the West, particularly during the Bush administration in the United States which obviously lacks the culture of consensus.

While Saikal is trying to highlight the common features of Western and Muslim cultures, starting from the common roots of Christianity and Islam, Hooker focuses on the diversity within Islam, resembling the diversity we taste in Western societies. The main theme is to show multiple Muslim positions on six essential issues of modern life: new world order, the new age and globalisation, the economy, the nation state, gender and Islam, and the law. By discussing different views on issues in each section from two distinct approaches, the reader is given a lively, conversational opportunity to understand the normality of Islam. The opportunity is created to replace the common misperception of Islam as a monolithic whole comprised of “aliens” and “strangers” with a more dynamic and down to earth understanding. At the bottom line it cries “look, those Muslims are like us; they debate, they disagree, they are normal.”

Saikal criticises the policies followed by the US and its Western allies in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. He concludes that these policies are worsening relations between the Muslim world and the West. Saikal puts forth five solutions to remedy the situation. First, assistance must be given to help rebuild Afghanistan. Second, a means must be found to enable Pakistan to achieve reforms. Third, a viable solution to the Palestinian problem must surface. Fourth, Iraqi

reconstruction must be successful. And finally, there must be further democratization in the Arab world. Based on similar assumptions, Panggobean also underlines the need for a functioning democracy in Indonesia.

Shboul shifts the focus to the diversity in the Muslim world. He asks “which Islam we are talking about?”, as it depends on when, where, and in what context. Is it the Islam of fundamentalists, or of modernized elite, or of a political regime such as Sudan, or of a violent opposition in Algeria, or of a pluralist system in Egypt? This list seems endless. He concludes that unless political and socioeconomic problems in the Arab world are properly addressed, the dangers of isolationism, extremism, disorder and disintegration will remain. He also cautions us to notice rationalist progressive versions of Modern Islam as well as religious extremisms. Madjid aims to provide a Koranic understanding of today’s problems in Indonesia which he suggests should be met with a practice based on good ethics.

Lubis revisits the principles of Islamic economy and its applications in Indonesia. He discusses issues rising between Islamic law and Islamic economics. His conclusion puts the burden on Muslim individuals as “Allah shall not change a condition...” Saeed, continuing the Islamic economics debate, focuses on the dilemma of Islamic banking and finance. The dilemma occurs mainly from the nature of the finance sector with its roots in the Western tradition of modern liberal economy and moral/religious limits imposed by Islam in the global market conditions. His advice to Muslim bankers is to be creative and pragmatist to overcome the problem.

Azra argues that formal Islam does not appeal to Indonesian Muslims because Islamic parties fail, leading to the revival of extremist pro-Sharia groups. The cure for the problem, according to Azra, is a stronger state along with good governance. These two should be accompanied by democracy, civil society, law and order, and economic recovery in Indonesia. Khoshroo, on the other hand, reflecting upon the experiences of Iran Islam Republic, highlights the irreconcilability of Islam and the nation state, and looks for potential bridges. The answer largely lies in the plurality in Islamic societies, which also brings dynamism to challenge the Muslim world to build a balance between Islam and democracy.

Probably the most speculated area in Islam is gender relations. Yasmeen presents a progressive image of the status of women in the Muslim world by using recent statistical evidence on educational and occupational attainment levels. Once again underlining the diversity in Muslim societies, the rights of women are also addressed in a variety of ways in different countries. Suggesting a three level model, she puts emphasis on the importance of middle space (or we may call it moderate areas, regions or countries) where women, she argues, use Islamic revivalism to their advantage instead of being repressed. She urges the international community to pay attention to and invest in this middle-space, moderate Islam, to improve the status of women. Robinson, on the other hand, focuses on the Indonesian literature on women status and highlights a lack of understanding of Islam’s role in women’s social position in the country. She gives historical examples from Muslim political actors, some opposed and some supportive of women’s empowerment. Robinson also shows us that surprisingly the literature had little room for women’s participation in political struggles in Indonesia despite the repressive understandings and interpretations of Islam prevalent in the country.

In the last two chapters, before the closing piece of V. Hooker, M.B. Hooker and Othman discuss the role of Muslims in the new millennium. Hooker offers a detailed and well-informed summary of Indonesian tension between the modern state and Islam. He attributes a positive role to creativity and the creative scholasticism in Islam in the (Islamic) transformation and stability in Indonesia. A similar positive approach continues with Othman’s piece, though it is slightly agitating and propagandist. Defining the new century as that of Asians and Muslims, he revisits the problems of the Muslim world and gives advice on what has to be done in this new millennium. This heavily religious and political text remains both as a positive and peaceful call and an example of an Islamic way of seeing the world in transition.

Although the book, in general, is very interesting and readable, this reviewer found it difficult to go through some sections due to so many references to the Koran with verses quoted. The compilation, however, does the job and provides a well-balanced selection of papers reflecting various streams of thought and practice from two bases of the Muslim world. It can be argued that an important missing piece in this compilation is Turkey. Because Turkey is more secular and more integrated with the democratic world (and probably Western world in general) than most other Islamic countries, more references to Turkey may have enhanced the authors' arguments and provided a useful bridge of understanding for Western audiences.