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## Book Review

# Islam in the West

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## BOOK REVIEW: ISLAM IN THE WEST

Vanessa Katalalos\*

Abe W. Ata and Jan A. Ali, eds. *Islam in the West: Perceptions and Reactions*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2018. pp. 280, AUD 53.36, 978-0199-48-711-0.

*Islam in the West: Perceptions and Reactions*, edited by Abe Ata, an expert on multiculturalism in Australia, and Jan Ali, a religious sociologist and trusted authority in the field of Islamic studies, is a collection of essays that offers important insights into the complexities involved in the relationship between Islam and the West. The book explores ideas around several relevant and important topics that fall under three main categories: *Perceptions and Attitudes*, *Inclusion and Exclusion*, and *Faith and Identity*. It clearly connects the historical with the modern, highlighting not only the lingering effects of colonialism on Muslim societies but how this impacts the perceptions of the West by Muslims and the interactions between Muslims and the secular West in an increasingly globalised world.

In part one, *Perceptions and Attitudes*, several themes related to the views, beliefs and attitudes held by Muslims and Westerners of each other are explored with a focus on young people.

Chapter one, “Attitudes of School-Age Muslim Australians Towards Australia: Gender and Religious Discrepancies: A National Survey,” and chapter two, “How Mainstream Australian Students Perceive Muslims and Islam: A National Survey,” by Abe W. Ata, impeccably complement each other. Ata provides an overview of Islam and immigration in Australia, aiding the reader in understanding how this has evolved over time. He further provides interesting analysis of the findings of a research study exploring the ideas, beliefs and perceptions held by Muslim high school students in Australia. This was undertaken to determine “how compatible the dual identities are, as Muslims and Australians, in the view of these students” (p. 15). In addition, he presents the findings of a study conducted not only to assess Australian students’ perceptions of Islam and its adherents but to gain more comprehensive understanding of how these ideas are formed to facilitate more harmonious relations. He does an excellent job of dissecting the data and sharing the perspectives of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The correlation between gender, religious affiliation and perception is one of the most revealing findings presented, with males and those from Christian backgrounds possessing more negative attitudes towards Islam. One of the major difficulties identified is that many Muslim students find themselves trapped between two vastly diverse

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cultures. While Ata contends that reaching a definite conclusion is difficult due to the complex historical and cultural elements, he provides some key insights about how to move forward within this chapter. He suggests that open dialogue with educational experts and strategies towards a more inclusive curriculum are important to facilitate change.

In chapter three, “Framing, Branding and Explaining: A Survey of Islam and Muslims in the Canadian Polls, Government and Academia,” Ali Dizboni and Christian Leuprecht provide the reader with deep understanding about the securitisation of Islam and its adherents in Canada. Dizboni and Leuprecht take a unique approach and analyse three areas: opinion polls, the government and scholarly research to ascertain whether Canada has a superior framework for integration. They argue, despite the perception of tolerance in Canada, the results of opinion polls demonstrate a clear connection between Muslims and a risk to safety. Furthermore, on examination of scholarly resources, which one might trust as being an accurate source of information, there is a tendency to establish “varying linkages between Islam, terrorism and radicalisation” (p. 80). In their analysis of government discourse, Dizboni and Leuprecht identify a trend of presenting Islam as an ideology tied to terrorism, as shown in reports and the implementation of anti-terror laws that have led to the greater securitisation of Muslim people in Canada. They conclude there have been positive developments within government and a shift away from generalisation and towards neutrality, which will hopefully pave the way toward a more inclusive society.

Part two, *Inclusion and Exclusion*, argues that many of the issues faced by Muslim people are interconnected and their experiences today are a direct result of the negative experience of colonialism, politics and the poor way in which Islam is presented.

In chapter four, “Integrated Acculturation and Contact Strategies to Improve Anglo-Muslim Relations in Australia,” Hisham M. Abu-Rayya first discusses how the implementation of the People of Australia: Australia’s Multicultural Policy fails to ensure equal treatment of all people, with Muslims often being treated as the ‘other.’ Abu-Rayya establishes a connection between the way events such as 9/11 are portrayed and the ensuing negative perceptions of Islam highlighting prejudice, animosity and acts of violence as some of the consequences for Muslim people. However, the primary objective of this chapter is to assess how evidence-based acculturation techniques might be applied to foster improved relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. Abu-Rayya highlights several findings based on an Interactive Acculturation Model centred on adolescents. He argues a strategically organised application of direct and indirect contact approaches can help facilitate better relationships and suggests a classroom setting inside educational institutions as an appropriate environment for acculturation.

As the book progresses, it effectively explores two key issues – radicalism and social exclusion – in chapter five, “Australian Muslims as Radicalised ‘Other’ and their Experiences of Social Exclusion” by Jan A. Ali. Considering the media is a primary source of information, it is natural that knowledge held about radicalism may be inaccurate and this chapter sheds new light on the subject. It examines historical, political and social complexities in a logical manner

and clearly establishes how Muslims have come to be regarded as the ‘other.’ Ali draws attention to the role of those in power, including politicians, security specialists, legislators and the media, particularly the dubious tactics employed and policies implemented. He argues this has set the tone for how Muslims are treated, resulting in exclusionary tactics limiting the ability of Muslims to participate meaningfully in society. Furthermore, he examines the three main driving forces that have led to radicalism and exclusion. First, the desire of a radical organisation or religious community to spread their religious law. Second, the way in which those outside the religion are perceived by radicals and finally the rejection of external conventions and immersion of what radicals consider to be virtuous beliefs, ideals and values. Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from this chapter is how the securitisation of Islam and its adherents have had no positive impact and instead only further fuelled division and led to greater exclusion of Muslims.

In chapter six, “Young Muslims Identity in Australia, and the US: The Focus on the Muslim Question” by Nahid A. Kabir, findings from a research study conducted in the United States and Australia are presented. Here, she looks at the ‘Muslim question,’ identity and the link between them. What follows is a comprehensive look at the world of young Muslim people. In particular, issues around identity, religion, the media, racial profiling and Islamophobia are examined through the eyes of young Muslims who offer a great deal of insight into their experiences. One of the most disconcerting aspects is the discrimination faced by young Muslims, highlighting the ongoing issue of an ‘us vs them’ mentality. Kabir concludes, through open discussion and opportunity for cultural interaction, a better foundation can be built so there is greater understanding and acceptance between the two cultures.

Following this, chapter seven, “Islam-West Relations and the Rise of Muslim Radicalism and Global Jihadism,” by Jan A. Ali and Drew Cottle, examines the relationship between Islam and the West, and how colonialism helped set the stage for radicalism. Jihad is a fundamental concept in the Islamic faith, yet it is commonly misinterpreted, particularly by non-Muslims or Muslims who lack thorough understanding of the religion. Navigating the complexities is difficult; however, Ali and Cottle do a remarkable job highlighting how colonialism and the ongoing dominance of Muslim people by those in the West has led to exploitative relationships and become the foundation upon which radicalism and jihadism is built. They provide a compelling argument that link the negative impacts on Muslim people to the hostile relationship between Islam and the West and show the reader that to understand the present day one must first understand the past that led to here.

In the final section of this part, chapter 8, “Engaging with Islam, Engaging with Society: The Participation of Muslims in Dutch Society,” Thijl Sunier explores the changing dynamics and attitudes around participation within Muslim communities in the Netherlands. One of the most significant changes is seen among young Muslim people who want to challenge the ideas held about Islam, in particular the notion that they support terrorism or want to distance themselves from Dutch society. Sunier brings to light a number of initiatives, demonstrating how engagement with Dutch society and working toward the common good can take on many forms. One of the issues identified is the association of Islam and Islamic organisations as being

foreign despite the majority of Muslims being born in the Netherlands. This appears to be an ongoing theme across many European countries. An exploration of communal networks and various modes of participation in conjunction with the legal position of religion is discussed. In addition, it presents an examination of the pillarised organisational structure of Dutch society throughout history, enabling the reader to better understand the foundations the current system has been built on. Sunier suggests a clearer understanding of how to create and cultivate societal connections can be gained by more in-depth examination of the initiatives in which young Muslims are engaged.

Part three, *Faith and Identity*, explores topics around religious identity and the way in which this plays out in different spheres as well as the influences and implications of converting to Islam.

In chapter nine, “Muslims in the Modern Sense: Kabyle’s Negotiating Religious Identity in the Czech Republic” Tereza Hyankova investigates the way in which Kabyle immigrants in the Czech Republic perceive and practise Islam. She provides a historical overview of the Kabyle people in their homeland, Algeria, and insights into the conflict between Kabyle and Arab people still seen in modern times. Essentially, there is a detached relationship between Kabyle immigrants, who are mostly young males, and Islam, with religious practises not being observed. For instance, drinking alcohol, eating pork or not praying five times a day are behaviours seen among the majority of Kabyle living in the Czech Republic. This reinforces the argument made by Hyankova that categorising all immigrants from Islamic countries as holding the same religious identity is problematic. To further illustrate this, the chapter highlights that some Kabyle assert they are not adherents of Islam, while others identify as contemporary Muslims, described as holding a shared moral framework and heritage. It is hypothesised that several interconnected elements influence how Kabyle people understand and practise Islam, including a “specific combination of multiple historical, social, and political factors” (p. 198). In other words, their religious identity has been influenced by colonial and postcolonial factors. The decision to relocate to the Czech Republic is motivated not only by financial considerations but also by a desire for independence and a new way of life. Against a landscape of extreme Islamophobia as seen during protests against the establishment of mosques and in the anti-Islamic beliefs held by those in power, Hyankova concedes this distancing from Islam may be advantageous and make it simpler for Kabyle people to achieve acceptance in the Czech Republic.

In chapter ten, “Faith Identity and Ideology” by Paul Mitchell and Halim Rane, the experiences of those who have chosen to convert to Islam, “a minority within a minority,” (p. 215) are explored in depth. Mitchell and Rane aim to shed light on the experiences, social interactions and relationships of ten male converts to Islam. This is accomplished through qualitative interviewing to provide firsthand accounts of the overall experience and the obstacles encountered, as well as how the community perceives them. An interesting aspect is, although the participants have encountered varying degrees of adversity, they are still pleased with their choice to convert. What makes this chapter unique is that it focuses on the male experience in an Australian context. In contrast, most of the research conducted on conversion

is focused on the female experience, with little data on the challenges and experiences faced by men in Australia. All in all, this chapter does a thorough job of providing not just a deeper understanding of the individual perspectives held by males but also showing, despite their religious conversion, they still wish to engage in harmonious relationships with those around them.

The final chapter in this book, Chapter 11, “Muslim Communities in a Catholic Country” by Enzo Pace and Khalid Rhazzali, discusses the presence of Muslim people as ‘the other’ in the context of Italy, a country with a deep connection to Catholicism. The chapter shares that a commonly held belief in Italy is that the ideas and values held by Muslims differ from those held by Catholics. This is an interesting perception and it may have been beneficial to share the perspectives of Italian people to better understand this phenomenon. The writers look at the history of Islam in Italy in addition to the societal, political and cultural factors that influence the experiences of Muslim immigrants. In an examination of mosques in Italy, Pace and Rhazzali concede it is difficult to provide an exact number due to differences in the data resulting from varying criteria within organisations about what constitutes a mosque. This chapter adequately presents the religious and political dynamics impacting Muslims in Italy, a country attached to its Catholic faith, and while a deeper look into the perception of Italian people may have been beneficial, all in all it is an informative and well written chapter.

This book offers an in depth look at critical issues involved in the relationship between Islam and the West, such as identity, faith, inclusion and exclusion. In addition, it examines the perspectives held, experiences and interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim individuals in contemporary times. Due to the increasingly connected world and rapid advancement in technology, we are more accessible than ever before. This has resulted in a rise in the transmission of disinformation, propaganda and false narratives, ultimately impacting Muslim people around the world and triggering an increase in negative perceptions of Islam and its adherents. As such, there has never been a more critical time than the present to address the tumultuous relationship between Islam and the West, making this book not only timely but necessary.

It offers a fresh perspective and builds on previous noteworthy publications such as *Islam and the West* by Amin Saikal. While comparable in some aspects, *Islam in the West* presents more contemporary research and provides a fresh look at a broader range of topics within a variety of contexts. In addition, it provides deeper analysis not just at the global level but also at the national level in the context of some countries. One of the greatest strengths of the book is the way complex topics are deconstructed and presented using facts, data, case studies and personal experiences. Another notable quality is the book’s thorough research and attention to detail in writing and editing. It is a solid scholarly text that keeps the reader engaged throughout the entire book making it a welcome addition to the existing literature that is often difficult to comprehend.

Overall, this book does an exceptional job of educating, enlightening and empowering the reader and is appropriate for academic and non-academic audiences. Despite the vast amount

of literature about Islam that has been published, this book is unique in its approach and analysis. Not only does it allow the reader to reach their own conclusions, it also offers a diverse number of contributors from different backgrounds enabling a more thorough and widespread view. The authors deserve recognition for a well written text.