

Muslims Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, by Andrew Rippin, (The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices), (4th edn., London & New York: Routledge, 2012), ix + 356 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-48940-9, \$44.95 (paperback)

A question it is always interesting to pose is what makes a textbook successful. This book by Andrew Rippin is much used as an introductory text on Islam and Muslims, my students certainly think highly of it, and yet the market is full of such books, guides to the material that one would expect to find in such a book. What we get with Rippin though is no “Islam for Dummies.” Much of the discussion takes place at a pretty high level of scholarship and the student is introduced to the sorts of arguments and issues that confront anyone interested in Islam, not a watered-down version. That is what makes this book useful, it treats its readers with respect and they return the compliment.

The book covers the expected topics, and the emphasis throughout is on the approaches to religion by Muslims, with their variety of traditions and beliefs. The state of Arabia before the arrival of the Prophet is described, then the Prophet himself and the Qurʾān, with quite a bit of discussion of the controversies surrounding its origins and organization. Theology, jurisprudence, politics, philosophy and ritual are well described, as are the varieties of ways of being a Muslim, which is a welcome theme of the book throughout. Given this emphasis I was a bit disappointed that all the images in the book are the stereotypical ones of women in hijab, men in ritual dress and so on. I would have loved to see just one picture of a man going to drive a bus in Vancouver or a woman in Ankara going to her law office, or vice versa, and both looking like everyone else without any especial religious identification, and yet just as much Muslim as anyone else.

A very large part of the book deals with modernity and perceptions of Muslims in the modern and especially Western world. Personally when I hear the word “modernity” used in connection with Islam I tend to writhe in agony. It is such an overdone topic, and I tend to resent the implication that Islam has any particular problem with modernity, which anyone looking at the huge number of books on the topic would naturally assume was the case. On the other hand there is undoubtedly a great deal of interest in the issue and so an

extensive treatment is no doubt appropriate. Here Rippin as ever does a good job, covering a variety of countries and cultures, and bringing out the various ways in which the modernity issue has been taken. A variety of thinkers are mentioned, which is excellent, and this to a degree represents the scope for debate and disagreement within Islam, something that superficial acquaintance with the religion doubts exists. Rippin avoids the temptation to pontificate, and students reading his work will be discouraged from doing so also, one hopes, since the very diversity of views on the religion defies easy generalizations and obvious shared positions.

If one were to cavil, there are things which might be addressed in the future. The index is not much good, it leaves out lots of terms that students are likely to look for. For example, niqab, burqa, veiling, shirk, music, architecture, art and conversion are not in the index, nor is Palestine or Wahhābī, and so readers who see these terms somewhere else and want to find out what their links are with the lives of Muslims have no easy ways of locating the relevant passages of the book. There are not enough cross references in the index to direct the reader to the relevant indexed terms. On the other hand, there is an excellent glossary and a really helpful list of sūras from the Qurʾān at the back of the book. I was disappointed that there is so little on material culture, on building, art, ornamentation, music and so on, since these clearly have played a considerable role in Islamic life and provide useful ways of discussing the religion and controversies within it through the use of objects. We tend to get the idea of a religion based on ideas and practices which is unembodied in anything physically solid. Finally, the Gülen Movement in Turkey and beyond no doubt deserves the discussion it receives here, since it is an interesting phenomenon, but Rippin fails to mention the less glamorous but equally significant Nurcu Movement which exists as a separate entity. Gülen is certainly a disciple of Saʿīd Nūrsī, but the text does not mention the fact that there are two separate movements, albeit no doubt often united in ideological interests and commitments. The Gülen Movement is regarded by many in Turkey and elsewhere as rather sinister and authoritarian, something which does not emerge at all in the discussion in the book.

I thought the last part of the book which looks at perceptions of Muslims in the twenty-first century is also a little unbalanced. Rippin does point to a variety of attacks that have taken place on Muslims in

the media and political system, and a growing suspicion of the community and its real intentions and attitudes. Islamophobia is a significant phenomenon and well worth discussing, as are the other issues that Rippin notes in this section. On the other hand, there are now well-established Muslim communities living all over the world and generally thoroughly part of the social fabric of the cultures of which they are a part. As so often, good news is not really newsworthy, and yet despite the machinations of cynical politicians and zealous religious leaders from all communities intent on upsetting the acceptance of Muslims in society, they have on the whole been accepted in countries with non-Muslim majorities. In Muslim majority countries we are beginning to see today parties come to power with a marked Islamic orientation and again this seems to pass off without too much shock and awe. We should not only ponder over the problems that have arisen but also celebrate the successes, since there are perhaps far more of the latter than their opposite.

It is precisely because the book elicits these sorts of comments that it is so useful in stimulating discussion in the classroom, based as it is on a thorough analysis of the facts and a lively contemplation of their meaning.

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