

Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an

Edited by Suha Taji-Farouki

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This work was published by Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, which operates from London. In its general layout, this is a work that is in line with John L. Esposito's *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (Oxford, 1983) and *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford, 2001), which he edited with John O. Voll. The work consists of an introduction, 10 separate articles and an index.

While it could be said that this book, which evaluates the views of "intellectuals" from the modern Islamic world about the Qur'an or their relationship with the Qur'an, brings "different ideas" formed around the Qur'an onto the agenda, the fact that it is not really such a depiction of "difference" can be sensed the minute one examines the names involved. In fact, when the names that participated are examined one gets the impression that these are names which have "a problem with traditional Islam" in their own countries or cultural environments. They are as follows: Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan), Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia), Amina Wadud (America, Afro-American), Muhammad Arkoun (Algeria-France), Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (Egypt), Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari (Iran), Mohamed Talbi (Tunisia), Hüseyin Atay (Turkey), Mohamad Sharour (Syria) and Sadiq Nahyum (Libya).

Even though the names that contributed to the work have been selected from different cultures, ranging from Indonesia to Algeria, even from the United States, one of the points on which they all converge is the thought that "because the social context has changed in the modern era the meaning of the Qur'an has changed or is to be changed." According to this perception, it is Western thought, philosophy and hermeneutics that will /should take an active role in the aforementioned change.

Among the names participating in this work, the place of Fazlurrahman in particular is rather important; he taught other names that have contributed to the work, like Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia) and Amina Wadud (USA) at the University of Chicago. Fazlurrahman, known as a leader of liberal thought, has affected Madjid's views of pluralism and Wadud's thoughts that are formed within the framework of feminism. Fazlurrahman, opposed to the view in traditional Islam that the "Qur'an is a legal text", thinks of the Qur'an as a general

directive that presents moral views. Fazlurrahman's idea that the Qur'an is a moral guide, not a legal one, can be seen to be a basic approach that feeds the sexual equality, religious pluralism and inter-religious tolerance found in Wadud and Madjid. Mohamed Talbi, a Tunisian who was educated in France, presents another idea that deals with the Qur'an and religious pluralism. According to Talbi, freedom, democracy and pluralism are concepts that are neither purely Western nor purely Islamic; rather, these concepts are universal concepts.

Names that are very familiar in Turkey also have a place in this work. One of these is Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, who comes to the fore with his linguistic approach to the Qur'an. According to him, the Qur'an can be interpreted like other texts, using semantic, semiotic and other linguistic tools. According to Abu Zaid, there should be a free relationship between the text and the reader. Hüseyin Atay, although he has a strong traditional religious education in his works and ideas, criticizes a subject by removing it from its context and finishes with an interpretation that lies outside the traditions. Atay, who sees reason and revelation as being equal, can be seen to present a positivist approach, criticizing and refuting traditional thought about fate and abrogation. The Syrian Mohamad Shahrour is not only the most traditional of the Muslim intellectuals found here, he also presents a very different picture of thought on the text of the Qur'an. According to Shahrour, the form of the Qur'anic text is set, but the contents can change.

If one knows that Mohammed Arkoun's main intention is known to be "struggle with dogmatic preconceptions", then the impression that these are names who, as we mentioned at the beginning, have "problems with traditional Islam" becomes even more distinct. Arkoun supports the idea that such preconceptions are obstacles to progress in philosophy, theology and especially anthropology.

When one reads the introduction written by the editor of the work, Suha Taji-Farouki, a number of questions come to mind. If the relationship between the West and the Islamic world not been a colonial-centered imposition, would the approach have been different? Would the conflict between tradition and modernity in Islamic society have been so clear? Or would we have experienced a more natural change in the direction of modernity? Of course, it is far too late to ask this question now and this relationship continues to be sharply divided. However, this much is certain; within the relationship that exists today, the West is searching for friends for itself in the Islamic world. What lies behind this turning to liberal Muslim thinkers/intellectuals in the West is the search for an "addressee" in the Islamic world. What the West is searching for consists of a liberal Muslim intellectual sector that is at peace with Western values and un-

derstands and speaks the language of its modernity, while at the same time will perhaps be able to modernize the Islamic World. However, there is a problem here for the West: If these intellectuals are “inclined to the West”, if they are “friends of the West”, does this not cast a shadow over their legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim masses?

In the introduction to the work, Suha Taji-Farouki brings up the question of “who was to speak in the name of Islam?” after the influence of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) over society had been removed (or supposedly removed). This, in fact, is a valid question for other religions, particularly for Christian religions in the West, with the loss of the religion’s effect on the modern world. Accompanied by an increase in the percentage of literate people and the spread of mass communication, a new intellectual sector has appeared alongside the *ulama* or men of religion. This intellectual sector, being more at ease with modern science, can be seen to have shaken the authority of the men of religion/*ulama*. As this began with the Renaissance and the reform process and has taken place over a long time, it has not been a sudden change in the West. But, unlike this gentle transition in the West, the Islamic world has undergone a sudden change with the effect of Western imperialism in the 20th century.

What is interesting is that, as Taji-Farouki indicates, this liberal intellectual class is considered in the West to be some sort of *avant garde* that will provide change in the Islamic world in the future, bringing to mind the idea in Lenin’s revolutionary theory that “an *avant garde* party should be formed to develop ideas in the proletariat.” According to Lenin, these people would again be revolutionaries and would show the proletariat the right way, teaching them and helping them to form a class consciousness. The fact that the liberal Muslim intellectuals use similar expressions here and that they are perceived to be an “*avant garde*” raises many questions. The most appropriate one is if this change is made despite the masses, then for whom is such a change being made and how legitimate can it be? In fact, even if such an *avant garde* movement were to be started in a liberal way at first, as it is a movement that disregarded the masses, is it not inevitable that some time later it would become despotism or a dictatorship? Then is not the envisaged Muslim liberal intellectual thought a problem for the West from the very beginning?

Thus, Taji-Farouki’s work does not speak of the *ulama*, but of intellectuals. This is all very well, but can these intellectuals represent, or do they represent, the Islamic world? Who are these intellectuals addressing? Does the traditional majority accept their authority? What is their relationship with Islamic society in general? What will it be like? Or are the things they are expressing only

peculiar to the West or to Western minds? What kind of things are on their agenda? Why do women and pluralism find a place among the basic subjects?

All of these demonstrate that the work has a Euro-centric view. The fact that Farid Esack, who has come to the fore with his “liberation theory” in the West, particularly in South Africa, is not among the names included in the work, or that in place of Hüseyin Atay, or alongside of him, the relatively more current name of Yaşar Nuri Öztürk could have been chosen from Turkey can all be explained by this Euro-centric view in the work.

This work, as stated at the beginning, runs parallel to the works of J.L. Esposito on Muslim religious, science and social leaders. In fact, Esposito’s work that was published in 2008 asks the same question as Taji-Farouki in the title: *Who Speaks for Muslims?*

Bilal Gökkır

Constructivism and Education

Edited by Marie Larochelle, Nadine Bednarz & Jim Garrison

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Constructivism is an umbrella concept that comprises theoretical schemes like cognitive subject, the learner/social actor, and the locus of knowledge. It is basically a description of the human cognitive process that is frequently associated with educational methods which support *learning by doing*, a phrase coined by John Dewey at the turn of the 20th century. This term has been interpreted in Turkish in a number of ways, but I prefer to use the term *yapılandırıcılık* in Turkish, which I found most fitting to the philosophy of learning that constructivism promotes. If I were to give some historical figures who contributed to constructivism in education, these would include Giambattista Vico, J.J. Rousseau, J. Dewey, J. Piaget, L. Vygotsky and V. Glasserfeld in the Western world. But there are also some important historical personalities in the Muslim world, such as Ebû Bekir Râzi, Ibn Haldun, Katip Çelebi, Selim Sâbit Efendi and Hasan Âlî Yücel, who can be considered to be constructivist educators in the general sense in their own *sui generis* contexts, as well as being prominent thinkers in Turkish or Muslim educational history.

Recently there has been some valuable literature published in English on constructivism and educational theory. Marie Larochelle, Nadine Bednarz and Jim Garrison have joined together and edited an important book which I intend