While the topic of “Islam and modernity” is hardly new, and anthologies now exist that collect diverse Muslim opinions on the topic, *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* is a valuable addition to the field because it brings together a series of excellent articles analyzing the ideas of a very diverse set of Muslim thinkers who wish to find a way to link Islam with a positive concept of modernity and are willing to subject it to bold new interpretations in order to do that. Although we frequently hear that we are living in a “postmodern” age, and it might seem passé to make modernity the focus of discussion, discussions of modernity continue to lie at the heart of public debate in the Muslim world, where all too often “modern” approaches to Islam are placed in opposition to “authentic” views of Islam. The diversity of responses represented in this book, the selection of thinkers, and the thoroughness and sophistication of the analyses written by a correspondingly diverse group of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, make this work thought-provoking and add considerably to the depth of writings on this topic. What these writers share is a commitment to the notions of human freedom and the inevitability of social change, which requires a corresponding change in religious thought to make religion relevant to society, especially societies undergoing rapid transformation, as Muslim societies are today.

It is important to note that a number of the writers represented in this
book have suffered persecution or even execution and accusations of apostasy for the views they hold. For example, Abd al-Karim Soroush’s philosophy classes at Tehran University in the 1990s were routinely disrupted by protesters alleging his apostasy and demanding that he be silenced, with apparent complicity—or at least lack of intervention—by university authorities. Similarly, in 1995, Nasr Abu Zaid was declared an apostate by an Egyptian appeals court, based on allegations that his controversial literary analysis of the Qur’an implicitly questioned the book’s divine origin. The ruling of apostasy implied that he could not remain married to his Muslim wife, and the couple sought refuge in the Netherlands. Mahmud Taha, a writer and spiritual teacher who was head of a group known as the Republican Brothers, was executed as an apostate in Sudan in 1985 in an attempt by Ja’far al-Numayri to gain Islamist approval. Clearly, this book is not trying to represent the Islamic interpretation of the majority, but the reasoned responses of Muslim intellectuals to the challenge of articulating a modern theology that does not do violence to their sense of rationality and is compatible with international conceptions of human rights.

Some aspects of this discussion are already very familiar to us from earlier analyses of the modernist thought of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh: the insistence on reinterpretation of the law and the use of a broad-ranging *ijtihad* as the means to do this; the conviction that “Islam” had aimed toward equal gender rights and freedom of faith, but historical conditions limited the possibility of actualizing these goals in the society of the Prophet; the dismissal of Sufism—or, more specifically, “emotional Sufism,” to use the words of Sa’id al-Buti—as a symptom of backwardness. But the discussion clearly reflects the changes in society over the course of the twentieth century. Far from opposing an Oriental despotic ideal with a Western ideal of democracy, for example, Mohamed Jabri asserts that democracy has become an aspiration and a mode of legitimization deeply entrenched in the modern Muslim consciousness, although real democracy, the participation of the masses, is feared by both modernists and traditionalists (157). He insists that the concepts of democracy are not linked to Western tradition at all, but are a product of modernity, the same modernity in which the Muslim world now participates. Abdou Filal Ansari comments in his article on Jabri, “The programme on which all [contemporary reformist] thinkers seem to converge, despite the important disparities between their initial premises, consists in pushing aside everything that tradition has accumulated on top of the basic principles of faith, and going back to the core of the creed and the perspective it was intended to create among believers” (160-161).