Jeffrey T. Kenny and Ebrahim Moosa (eds.)


The reasons why Islam has been oftentimes represented as a civilisational paradigm neatly contrasting with the Eurocentric notions of theology, theory, state power, and religious authority cannot be reduced to cultural asymmetries, or even to an alleged deficit of Islamic tradition to engage with multiple strands of modernity to which Muslim societies have been exposed. The tendency to project Islam as a counter-discourse to the expansive and ever-mutating intellectual landscape of secular modernity has paradoxically to do with the historical trajectory of transformation of religion rather than any purported cultural distance or radical civilisational alterity. However, the Western European proclivity to insulate Islam as a convenient “other” has overlooked most of the structural changes in the Muslim world – such as massive urbanisation, the emergence of new institutions and associations, mass education, economic transformations, and political mobilisation. _Islam in the Modern World_ is a substantial volume that makes an important contribution to providing a clear-cut framework for studying modern Islam based on a threefold set of objectives: (i) “to show the multiple ways Muslims have engaged with modernity”; (ii) to see how this engagement is grounded “in the interplay between socio-historical circumstances and interpretations of Islamic tradition and identity”; (iii) to provide an intricate and “culturally diverse portrait of the lived Muslim experience ...” (4). With these multifaceted objectives, the volume, as reflected throughout the chapters, provides a broader overview of the debates and questions regarding a discursive array of issues, institutions, and developments that are redefining the modern Muslim experience such as gender, media, social change, and shifts in religious authority. The book comes in three parts devoted to studying the analytical framework which according to its editors is resolutely based on a biological classification, as a species within a broader taxonomic group, reli-
The book proper opens with an analytical description of the important and somewhat paradoxical role of authoritative scriptural sources (Qurʾān and Hadīth) in the Muslim world by Jonathan Brown (14–33), testing whether the thesis of (i) prioritising the Qurʾān over the traditional corpus of Hadīths and (ii) the Qurʾān as a monolithic textual corpus correspond to fact. He argues that any attempt at reading the Qurʾān without falling back on religious premises about how it stood above the vicissitudes of history will of necessity have to take the processual genesis of the text in a critical manner, i.e., as profoundly affecting both its chronological reconstruction and its theological and anthropological content – if, that is, the endeavour towards a chronological ordering of the Qurʾānic text that rests on argument rather than faith. The author admits, though, Muslim scholars and intellectuals have contested the stylistic, thematic, and conceptual heterogeneity in contextualising different parts of the Qurʾān, but no Muslim scholar has detected discrepancies in the Qurʾānic corpus or even questioned its status as a preserved revelation.

Under “Ethical Landscape: Laws, Norms, and Morality” (36–55) Ebrahim Moosa, a specialist in the field of modern Islamic ethics, Islamic law and the Middle East, contends that “the Muslim ethical landscape is the confluence of multiple traditions – modern and pre-modern, local and transnational – and is better thought of as rootstalks or kudzu that shoots out roots and leaves from any point in the organism” (36). While admitting that there are multiple areas of Muslim ethical thinking that need exhaustive deliberation, Moosa is of the justified opinion that to deal with complexities enmeshed in capitalist political systems, innovation in Muslim ethics has to transcend beyond the literal reading of texts and involve a new set of global iconographies through which the varieties of Muslim experience would be analysed and regulated. The bulk of this section is dedicated to analysing the nexus between traditional Islamic institutions and practices, with the notable addition to this being the excellent chapter by Malika Zeghal on the transformation and expansion of Islamic education in contemporary times (126–147). Zeghal’s gripping analysis provides a deeper context for exploring innovative forms of knowledge that deeply transformed the structure and modes of transmission of religious knowledge, while also helping to explicate how the revitalisation of traditional institutions brought religious knowledge into closer interaction with secular projects.

The second part of the book begins with Valentine M. Moghadam’s and Namrata Mitra’s treatment of gender relations, particularly the issue of specific constructions of gender and religious identity that affect the construction of a nation (152–176). The authors discuss how gender relations have been affected by political and economic forces and how the agony of intercultural dislocation and displacement negotiates identity politics and women’s social and politi-