

## *Book Reviews*

### **Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities**

*Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari, and Sulayman Nyang, eds.  
Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2012. 258 pages.*

This excellent study brings together a number of widely regarded Western scholars of Islam as contributors on the nature and history of Islamic studies in the American academy. This compilation is part of “The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities,” a research project undertaken by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and the Center for Islam and Public Policy (CIPP) between 2004 and 2007. Its findings were first made available in draft form on IIIT’s website in 2009 (<http://iiit.org/iiitftp/PDF%27s/Islamic-Studies.pdf>), where it remains as of writing this review. That draft appears to have been substantially complete, and one wonders why it took three years to remove a chapter and then add a more refined introduction, a short conclusion, and a bibliography. Still, its earlier online availability (free of charge) means that one cannot be too critical of its delayed publication.

This volume brings together some major names in Western Islamic studies, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr, John Voll, Farid Esack, and Saba Mahmood, and represents important reflections on the state of the field as an academic endeavor. Ten essays, varying in length from eleven pages to ones almost four times that length, are preceded by a useful introduction and conclusion, both of which concisely summarize noteworthy aspects of each essay and can serve as a valuable overview for the rushed reader. The study includes essays of both a qualitative and quantitative nature, which are generally of high quality. The editors state that they seek to inform the lay reader as well as scholars in the field, but also feel that the “data and analyses [...] will be immensely valuable for educational planners and administrators who are interested in strengthening programs of Islamic studies in institutions of higher learning” (p. xxvii). Given the constraints of space, I restrict serious reflection to only a handful of the rich essays.

In the first essay Anouar Majid examines, in what he admits is a “rather simplistic sketch” (p. 10), the rise of the American consciousness of Islam. Although it contains insightful historical reflections, he does appear to make rather contentious and essentialist comments about the West. For example, he asserts that “like Europe and the West in general, the U.S. was established as the antithesis of Islam” (p. 2). The utility of an otherwise intelligent essay need not be vitiated by such claims, which can simply be toned down in the mind of the informed reader.

The next two essays form a sort of unit, as they both relate to the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr – the first essay is authored by him, and the second is by John Voll. Nasr details the evolution of Islamic studies in the West and the twentieth-century shift from a philological to a more social science approach to the field, which he feels does not approach the tradition in an appropriately holistic fashion. This remark appears a little dated today, since it does not address the current debate between the area studies approach and the various theoretical approaches to Islamic studies found particularly in religion departments. Nasr demands that Islam be studied not as sociological and historical phenomena in area studies departments, but rather as a religion in religion departments, while being careful not to simply graft Christian paradigms onto the study of Islam. Since later on in the volume Zahid Bukhari and Faisal Islam suggest that this has already happened to a large extent (p. 183), and that Islam is taught more frequently in religion departments today than in area studies departments, one wonders if Nasr is aware of this change.

His grievance is, however, deeper than the simple issue of transposing the study of Islam into religion departments. He calls for the centrality of Islam’s religious nature to be recognized when Islamic social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena are studied. Essentially he is arguing for an entire reconceiving of Islamic studies as a field in the Western academy. His recommendations for such a re-conception are too innumerable to recount here, and should be given consideration by senior scholars and educators concerned with shaping the future of the academic endeavor of Islamic studies.

John Voll’s essay explores Nasr’s thought and prolific scholarship by reflecting on developments in the Western studies of Islam, particularly in the realm of Sufism and religious experience. He prefaces his discussion with a brief history of Western Islamic studies before Nasr, from the rise of the Orientalist approach in the nineteenth-century to the rise of the area studies approach, which, he notes, recapitulating Nasr’s point, relegated Islam to being one aspect in the study of Middle Eastern cultures (p. 33). In the 1950s, Nasr

was one of the first Muslim scholars to emerge in the West as an authority on Islam, and his work attempted to affirm the notion – still tacitly rejected by some in the field – that “one can be both a religious believer and a credible scholar” (p. 34). In the remainder of his essay, Voll traces Nasr’s influence on and relationship with the developing discourse on Islam both within and beyond the academic field of Islamic studies, which, *inter alia*, provided a salubrious counter to some of the ideas of scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington.

In the next essay, Farid Esack develops an almost poetic typology of approaches to studying the Qur’an by modern scholars. This short piece explores a range of approaches to the Qur’an in Western scholarship, on the part of both Muslims and non-Muslims, from traditionalist approaches to radical revisionist ones. It is followed by Saba Mahmood’s rich yet concise essay that reflects on Islam and gender, and traces the history of the ongoing reevaluation of terms and concepts used from the Orientalist phase to what she describes as the “post-orientalist” one (p. 74). Among other things, she problematizes the notion that compartmentalizes Muslim men and women’s ideological worlds in a manner that suggests that men suffer from anxiety as society becomes less patriarchal while women embrace such change, and the only impediment they face comes from their male counterparts (pp. 78-79). Given that both have been conditioned by patriarchal society, she suggests that it is wrong to assume the existence of such a smooth dichotomy. Her chapter is followed by Marcia Hermansen’s important reflective essay on the history of the study of Sufism in the American academy.

Hermansen’s chapter is followed, in turn, by Jane Smith’s informative essay describing the teaching of Islam in the somewhat unexpected context of American theological schools, which constitute a remarkably large proportion of the venues at which Islam is a formal subject of study in the United States. The editors describe Christopher Buck’s essay as the first comprehensive treatment of the 2002 University of North Carolina controversy, characterized by Michael Sells as “suing the Koran on behalf of the Bible” (pp. xxiii and 138). This narrative-cum-analytic essay by an attorney and independent scholar documents an important post-9/11 controversy at a major university and demonstrates that even the academic study of Islam is not safe from what some observers have called the “Islamophobia industry.” Faisal Islam and Zahid Bukhari’s survey of Islam 101 courses from 105 American schools provides an excellent bird’s eye view of the teaching of the most ubiquitous Islamic studies course in American higher education. Their highly accessible quantitative essay makes for surprisingly easy and informative reading.

The final chapter, by Mumtaz Ahmad, is a summarized compilation of two focus group discussion sessions related to the theme of this volume, bringing together scholars mostly listed in Appendix B of the chapter (p. 250). A number of these scholars later contributed chapters to this volume and for them, this chapter recapitulates, in summarized form, the ideas they expand on in their respective essays. Where it does not repeat ideas stated in previous essays, it provides important reflections on the state of the field from some of its most respected scholars. This chapter, which is the volume's final substantive piece, is followed by the editors' short concluding remarks.

All in all, this volume is a useful contribution for scholars concerned with self-reflexivity in the study of "alien" cultures within the academy. CIPP, IIIT, the contributors, and the editors are all to be thanked for their participation in this project. One unfortunate feature, however, is the absence of an index. This is something that I have never experienced in an academic work written in English, but which is a common feature to all the works I have come across published by IIIT. If the Institute would like to be taken more seriously in the wider academic community, this is a *sine qua non* of academic publishing that it cannot afford to ignore. This issue aside, I hope that the book receives a wide readership among both Islamic studies scholars and those who direct Islamic studies programs in North America and beyond.

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