

**The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam:
Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry**

Omid Safi

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 293 pages.

This is an excellent book. With a beautiful, exemplary scholarly style, Omid Safi treats the reader to a deep sounding of accounts of the frequently marginalized players and problems of Islamicate intellectual, religious, political,

and social history. The welcome news is that we must learn to treat nothing as marginal in the formation of culture and thought. The audiences and conversations analyzed and interpreted here provide a previously largely unnoticed door to some very serious truths about the rise, formation, and especially the characteristic institutional formations of early and later medieval Islamicate society. While I think the title is a mistake (*premodern* produces inappropriate expectations), one is equally sympathetic with the author's avoidance of the "M" word for a number of reasons. One of the most pernicious of these is that *medieval* frequently functions as a euphemism for Islamic or Islamicate in a milieu *still* disinclined to appreciate the formative, creative, and enduring genius of this great civilization and the debt that our world so profoundly owes it. Forgive the *khutbah*, but it seems that this cannot be repeated too often, unfortunately.

The book is divided into six chapters that explore the formation of a special, *sui generis*, type of Islam at the hands of the Saljuqs and their deft (and sometimes thankfully duplicitous) negotiations with a number of actors in the drama: "Deconstructing the Great Saljuq Myth" (chapter 1), "The Nizam's Realm, the Orderly Realm" (chapter 2), "Saljuq State Apparatuses" (chapter 3), "The Shifting Politics of al-Ghazali" (chapter 4), "Bargaining with *Baraka*" (chapter 5), and "An Oppositional Sufi: `Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani" (chapter 6). Our author's chief interest is with those writers, thinkers, and spiritual paragons so frequently categorized (sometimes with relief) as [those] Sufis. Safi demonstrates the social and political agenda at work in the "final," post-tenth-century CE elaboration (as in "icing on the cake") of Islamic orthodoxy, an epithet that should never be used.

These six well-researched and extraordinarily thoughtful chapters build on the universal, not to say prophetic, vision of Marshall Hodgson's *Venture of Islam* by testing his insights and producing a glorious bouquet of new ones. Although the tiresome (and frequently untrue) "this book must be read by all those who ..." is too often read in reviews, it happens not to be merely a cliché in this instance, for this exceptional work explodes so many fallacies (as distinct from "myths").

Words of appreciation and commendation in the form of a foreword by Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence contextualize the publication as part of a series entitled "Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks." The author generously acknowledges a wide range of persons (hewing, presumably, to a salubrious and productive principle that none encountered in the process are insignificant to the enterprise). A breathtaking bibliography serves a very useful pedagogical purpose for those intent upon "understanding" Islam, and a rather brief index closes the book.

In his wonderful conclusion, our gentle, perspicacious scholar reminds us that positivism is not his religion, that we now have more empirical evidence to help avoid using those (in the Islamicate instance) imbecilic terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* by understanding the somewhat accidental, *ad hoc*, and thoroughly human evolution of the Islamic historical and institutional reality. One feature of this reality, *walaya* (no entry in index), may be considered the “ghost in the machine” susceptible of benevolent and/or malevolent issue, depending upon the context, the bearer, the audience, and the historical “weather.” Why al-Ghazzali and not `Ayn al-Qudat? is a question left inevitably, marvelously “methodologically” open. We are invited to explore this opening for the truth about Islam. And behold! That truth is found circling around the plangent verity that however much the Qur’an is clearly the Word of God and Muhammad, upon whom be His blessing and peace, is the shining example of the virtuous life, it is human beings with all of their plusses and minuses that hear and follow.

It is unfortunate that such an important book is produced so badly; my brand new paperback copy is already falling apart. While it may be true that all things are perishing, it would be sporting, at least, if the buyer had a chance to read the book at least once before pages go missing. This, of course, is not the author’s responsibility. But perhaps the publisher could consider charging a little more for a better quality product. With the current US\$ 20.96 as the price of admission to this beautifully meditated, researched, and illuminating rethinking of one of the more crucial periods in Islamic (and therefore world) history, we surely have here a case of inaccurate valuation.

Todd Lawson
Associate Professor of Islamic Thought
Department of Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada