Cultural Diversity and Islam

Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk, eds.
Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003. 240 pages.

As a compilation of papers presented at an international conference (1998) on "Cultural Diversity and Islam" at American University in Washington, DC, this volume brings together the contributions of a wide array of scholars. It has four sections and twelve chapters dealing with diversity and/or pluralism in relation to Islam.

The first section, "Cultural Diversity in Civilizational Perspective," provides a macro (and at times comparative) perspective on Islam and diversity. In chapter 1, the editors prepare the ground for discussion by providing some definitions, potential questions, and chapter summaries. They also explain why they prefer the concept of diversity over pluralism.

In chapter 2, Seyyed Hossein Nasr discusses what he calls "a theoretical and practical dilemma" in Islam: unity vs. diversity. Entitled "Unity and Diversity in Islam and Islamic Civilization," this chapter makes general statements about the nature of diversity in Islam and how unity and uniformity differ. Nasr argues that "Islam's refusal to reduce this unity-in-diversity to mere uniformity, far from weakening the faith, has been a major cause of its strength through the ages" (p. 33). To understand more fully how Islam created a unitary civilization that has thrived on diversity, he looks at different cultural zones within Islam.

The issue of Islam and diversity is often discussed in reference to the assertion of Islam's compatibility with democracy as well as the challenges produced by globalization, which brought Islam into closer contact with western and other cultures. It is uncommon for scholars addressing such issues to raise the question of power.

Sulayman S. Nyang's excellent article in chapter 3 brings the issue of power into the equation. Looking at what he calls the factors and

forces responsible for the continuity and discontinuity in Muslim opin-
ions toward cultural diversity, Nyang's account teases out the specific
events that have been shaping Muslim societies in relation to issues of
diversity. For example, he elaborates on how and why the European
conquest and colonization of Muslim lands created the cultural and
philosophical transformations that led to the Muslims' enthronement of
nationalist ideas. He identifies seven developments as crucial to engen-
dering the ensuing crisis of cultural alienation: (1) the Age of
Discovery, (2) the Industrial Revolution, (3) the European colonization
of Muslim lands in the nineteenth century, (4) the transplantation of
nationalist ideas and their acceptance by Muslims, (5) the rise of com-
munism, (6) the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and, finally (7) the collapse
of the former Soviet Union and the resulting growth of Euro-American
hegemony.

In chapter 4, "'True' and 'False' Pluralism in the West and Islam,"
Richard K. Khuri questions the very concept of "pluralism" from a philo-
sophical and historical perspective. Challenging the often apologetic dis-
cussions of Islam and pluralism, he states that the current form of pluralism
in the United States is nominal and consumed by a global anti-culture.
Against the specter of global monism (p. 59), he calls for revitalizing the
sources of "authentic pluralism" both in the West and in Islam.

The second part, "Islamic Perspectives on Cultural Diversity," starts
with a fascinating intellectual historical study of "the conceptual foundation
of cultural diversity in premodern Islamic civilization." Wadad al-Qadi pro-
vides an archeology of the dynamics of pluralism within Islam. Highlighting
the tolerance shown and the freedom of expression given to the heretical
Shu`ubiyya movement in Islamic history, al-Qadi explains the basis for the
remarkable openness of early Islamic society (as opposed to contemporary
Muslim societies). Chapter 6, Sachiko Murata's article on "The Islamic
Encounter with the Chinese Intellectual Tradition" provides a clear example
of Islam's cultural resilience. John O. Voll's rather short piece (chapter 7)
offers a general view on "Pluralism and Islamic Perspectives on Cultural
Diversity."

The third part, "Crisis in Islamic State and Society," provides a theo-
retical discussion (chapter 8) and a case study (chapter 9). In chapter 8,
Robert D. Lee argues for "modernizing" the potential of Islamism and,
hence, a partial success for at least a modified version of modernization the-
ory. A. Reza Sheikholeslami explores "The Transformation of Iranian
Political Culture" in chapter 9.

The book's final part, "Alternative Models of Coexistence," contains contributions from South Africa, Lebanon, and Thailand. Farid Esack, Su'ad al-Hakim, and Chaiwat Satha-Anand share narratives of coexistence in their respective societies. The three cases presented are from "Muslim-minority" or at least "Muslim-non-majority" (as in the case of Lebanon) contexts. Historically, minorities have favored plurality for obvious reasons. One can argue that, unlike Muslim minorities that do not live in (authoritarian) Muslim states, Muslim-majority societies hardly have enough "political" autonomy to entertain an exclusively "Islamic" approach to diversity (except for Iran, which probably owes its partial democracy to that autonomy). This reality, however, does not justify this volume's exclusive reliance on examples from Muslim-minority contexts.

More importantly, *Cultural Diversity and Islam* lacks the insights offered by the Turkish experience of Islam, where interesting ideas on democracy and pluralism have been articulated by such Muslim intellectuals as Bediüzzaman Said Nursi against the background of Kemalist cultural colonization. Furthermore, it is hard to see why this book is titled *Cultural Diversity and Islam* and not simply *Diversity and Islam*, since the authors have no consensual understanding of diversity and frame their debates around political, rather than cultural, diversity.

Unfortunately, this book has serious technical and editorial problems. There is no correspondence between the text (especially chapter 8) and the endnotes. There are more than twenty typos, and such a lack of editorial care is hard to ignore. For example, "McWorld" is misspelled (MacWorld) several times, and Lee's title is misspelled in the editors' chapter. In another case, Nyang's article lists seven major developments but only explains the first six. The section on the seventh one is missing.

In addition to suffering from a lack of editorial care, this book could have benefited from an additional emphasis on how Islamic forms of pluralism, although religious in origin, can accommodate other religious and nonreligious elements in a globalized society. However, *Cultural Diversity and Islam* raises a crucial question and offers a substantial contribution to the growing interest in Islam and its ability to coexist with other cultural identities.

Mucahit Bilici
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan