

Amirpur's command of the subject matter is admirable. Despite the complexity and nuance embodied in the author's discussions, the book is also highly readable and accessible to the non-specialist. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2017.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2017.1)

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THOMAS BAUER, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität, Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011. 405 pages, notes, bibliographies, index. Cloth US \$27.25 ISBN: 978-3-458-71033-2

Only rarely do scholarly books contribute to a new understanding of present day global problems, but this one might well be the exception: it addresses two very different groups of readers, those in the western as well as in the Arab world.

Its main subject is how Arab scholarship in the Middle Ages and long afterwards was characterized by a search for diversity, resulting in plurality and tolerance. This study also explains contemporary religious conflict and extremism as a result of the infringement of Western thinking on Arab scholarship, which had the effect of diminishing the social and intellectual achievements of ambiguity.

The author is the outstanding German Arabist and 2013 Leibnitz Prize laureate, Thomas Bauer, who combines a solid base in philology with intelligent creativity and deep insight in present day developments.

In an earlier publication (Thomas Bauer, 2005, "Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches," in *Mamluk Studies Review* IX-2, 105–32; http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_IX-2_2005-Bauer.pdf), the author discussed the age-old view, held both in the East and in the West, that the period of Arab civilization stretching from the middle of the thirteenth century until the campaign of Napoleon in Egypt (1798) was characterized by intellectual stagnation and the copying of earlier intellectual achievements without significantly building upon them. As a consequence, more recent scholars on both sides have been much less interested in this period. In his reassessment of this widely accepted historiographical conclusion, Bauer showed that it was actually a period of continuing growth and lively debate, resulting in ever renewing ideas and attitudes.

His present study begins with an analysis of the methods of early Arab scholars, whose purpose was initially to safeguard a correct version of the Qur'an as the word of God. But from the beginning, when the Qur'anic

material was still being collected, all kinds of textual variants occurred that aroused discussion about the authenticity of the text. One would expect a process of separating the “good” from the “bad”, but that proved to be impossible. These qirā’āt (modes of reading/reciting) were mainly caused by the—then still—defective Arabic script. For example, a verb like *nunshizu* could be read as *nunshiru*. This resulted in an ambiguous interpretation of part of the Qur’anic verse 2:259 (in Arberry’s translation): “And look at the bones, how we shall set them up ...”, but it could be read alternatively: “... how we shall raise them to life ...”(Q 2:259). This example is typical. Both versions are feasible and neither of them changes the meaning of the verse as a whole.

Bauer divides the method that the collectors of the Qur’anic text used as follows: Obtaining as many modes of reading as possible; sorting out the excess ambiguous readings and constraining its proportions if need be; and dividing them according to grades of probability.

Quintessential in this process was the ambition to preserve as many of these readings as possible, instead of reducing them to one canonic reading, because these scholars realized that God in His endless wisdom might have meant to convey any one of these meanings, but also that He might have intended to reveal them to human kind together as one in all their ambiguity. In other words: who are we to sort out Gods intentions?

Besides the Qur’an, the hadith (the sayings and acts of the prophet Mohammed), had to be studied as well, because the Qur’an as a guideline for desirable human behavior proved insufficient. Both Qur’an and hadith, were to form the basis of Islamic jurisprudence, but collectors of hadith encountered problems comparable with those of the collectors of the Qur’anic texts, which meant that the same procedures were followed: collecting, selecting, and evaluating along a sliding scale of probability.

All this resulted in an acceptance of ambiguity, next to including openness and frankness, not only in scholarly studies, but also in other domains of life. Bauer discusses two of them in which he perceives the same kinds of openness and tolerance: Arabic poetry and the realm of sexuality. Arabic poetry is by no means prudish; on the contrary: homosexuality, debauchery, and lust were frequent themes in Arabic poetry and prose.

Bauer speculates on what has gone wrong; why this open and frank attitude to life disappeared. In his view the nineteenth century encounter of the Arab world with the Western Cartesian method of strict dualism might well have been a decisive factor. In fact, he is convinced that the expulsion of ambiguity lies at the basis of salafist and other extremist tendencies in the modern Arab world.

This book should definitely be translated into English for a wider readership. Books in general do not solve fundamental sociocultural problems, but by reconsidering the heritage of the past they can help us to think again. ✂

DOI:10.1017/rms.2017.54

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JULIE BILLAUD. *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. viii + 209 pages, chronology, notes, bibliography, index, acknowledgements. Cloth US\$55.00 ISBN 978-0812246964

In response to feminist justifications for the war in Afghanistan, Arundhati Roy once posed the rhetorical question: “Can we bomb our way to a feminist paradise?” The same dissonance expressed in Roy’s quip inspired anthropologist Julie Billaud to examine the long-term demands placed on contemporary urban Afghan women as a result of war and foreign interventionism, exploring how their lives have changed in the intervening years since the US invasion and whether or not we can say they’ve changed for the better. The resulting monograph, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*, reveals the complex negotiations Afghan women undertake on a daily basis, where every decision—whether in terms of clothing, education, or career—becomes a political statement. While in the West the public sphere is connected with assumptions of increased freedom, in Afghanistan gender politics and cultural expectations place boundaries on women’s public participation wherein they must actively perform their identities and adapt them to situations and contexts that are constantly in motion. Combating stereotypes and typical Orientalist portrayals of Afghan women as passive burka-clad victims, Billaud’s study bears witness to their extreme resourcefulness and tenacity, depicting these women as individual agents actively negotiating the varied landscapes of war, occupation, and reconstruction.

Billaud’s study is divided into six topical chapters. The first provides an historical overview, beginning with the reign of King Amanullah (1919–1929) and carrying through to the U.S. invasion of 2001. In this chapter, Billaud frames modern Afghan history around the tensions between both modernity versus tradition and imagined ideals versus reality, that have shaped Afghan’s women’s lives throughout the twentieth century. Billaud also shows how Western colonial narratives of Muslim women have influenced