

BOOK REVIEWS

KATAJUN AMIRPUR. *New Islamic Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Democracy, Freedom and Women's Rights.* London: Ginko Library, 2015. xvi + 220 pages, acknowledgements, bibliography, and index. Cloth US\$39.95 ISBN 9781909942738.

Katajun Amirpur's *New Thinking in Islam* is a welcome and timely contribution to discussions on Islamic reform. In a straightforward, approachable manner, Amirpur examines the intellectual contributions of six notable reformist scholars of Islam—Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Mojtabeh Shabestari. All address a central problem of Islamic theology of how to deal with specific Qur'anic statements (199), as well as attend to the criticism of hadith as one of the most important aspects of the modern study of Islam (123). By placing the Qur'an at the center of their expositions, these advocates of Islamic reform challenge the most fundamental misconceptions about Islam and modernity, and illuminate the diversity of perspectives—often unacknowledged in the West.

These scholars have an array of backgrounds: two are women (Barlas and Wadud), one of which is an African American convert (Wadud). Two of the scholars are of Iranian background (Soroush and Shabestari); two were born in Pakistan (Barlas and Rahman); and one an Arab, born in Egypt (Abu Zaid). The thinkers also represent both Sunni and Shi'a schools. Amirpur dedicates an entire chapter to each scholar. Her thoughtful examination situates each scholar's life in the broader political and social developments of the time period, and reflects on their personal circumstances and how this impacted their future reform agenda, as well as the political and social consequences and repercussions of each scholar's agenda.

Although the scholars differ in their points of departure and the angles of reform, they emphasize their most poignant criticisms address the relationship between politics and religion, women's rights, and freedom. Shabestari highlighted that in the first instance government had to be just. Abu Zaid adamantly rejected the suppression of freedom of expression and maintained that belief is a matter between God and the believer, and not

a matter of state. Soroush vociferously advocated for the de-ideologization of the religion, and advocated for a fruitful exchange between Islam and Western scientific and intellectual developments. Both Abu Zaid and Soroush were exiled for their criticism, condemning the monopolization of textual interpretation and its misuse for political purposes. Wadud and Barlas interpreted the Qur'an from a feminist perspective. Many regard Wadud as having unleashed a revolution in Islamic thought. Like others in the volume, she calls for moving away from the literal and embracing the spirit of Islam. Similar to Wadud, Barlas also believes that suppression of women contradicts the very spirit of Islam, though many feminist scholars of Islam regard her approach as more systematic than that of Wadud. Rahman was adamant that the Qur'an was not a book of laws, and distanced himself from traditional exegesis. Similarly, Shabastri, though a Shi'a cleric with the rank of *hojjat al-Islam* (which places him just one step below an Ayatollah in the clerical hierarchy (168), also distanced himself from traditional exegesis. His teaching and research has focused on the reconciliation between Islam, democracy, human rights, and modernity. He is regarded as a pioneer in the field of hermeneutics in Iran.

The scholars discussed in this volume differ in the extent of their impact and in which communities. Amirpur argues that Rahman, for example, has only been partially accepted in the Arab world. She attributes this to the fact that many Arabs have little confidence in non-Arab thinkers and intellectuals. However, if this is the case, Amirpur has not made the case about the extent of influence of other Arab Islamic thinkers today.

Amirpur is careful not to ignore resistance to these scholars' ideas. She highlights that four of the six thinkers—Abu Zaid, Rahman, Barlas, and Soroush—had to leave their homelands for political reasons. Additionally, the Egyptian state sought to forcefully annul the marriage of Abu Zaid from his wife. In the case of Wadud, although she did not have to leave for exile, the Muslim community in Virginia wanted her fired from her job.

Any criticisms are minor and do not take away from the important and timely contributions of the book. Perhaps the book could have benefitted from a more meticulous editorial hand. Moreover, some of the additional examples introduced in the text, such as Nawal Saadawi ostensibly working in the spirit of Islamic feminism, are quite simplistic and superficial and do not command the same authority as the main cases examined in the manuscript. In a few instances, the manuscript veers into an apologetic tone—understandably though, likely a response to the anti-Muslim sentiments that saturate Western perceptions of the Islamic faith today.

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)

Manal A. Jamal
James Madison University

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