

Controversies in Contemporary Islam

CONTROVERSIES in Contemporary Islam is a textbook covering two types of major controversy relating to Islam. It covers both popular and scholarly controversies about Islam in the contemporary West, and controversies within Islam, historical as well as contemporary, since many contemporary controversies within Islam are continuations of historical controversies. Its declared aims are to “provide some scope for discussion and debate about Islam” (p. 2) and to “deepen our understanding of the varieties of contemporary Islam” (blurb).

In *Controversies in Contemporary Islam*, Oliver Leaman covers fourteen selected areas of controversy in fourteen chapters, though in fact individual chapters often cover multiple, related topics. Leaman starts with the basics: human authority in Islam from the succession dispute after the death of the Prophet to today's sectarian divides, then textual authority—Islam's written sources and how to understand and work with them—and then God Himself. After this, Leaman uses a chapter on the Islamic city (or not) as an occasion for an interesting discussion of the relationship between religion and reality, between Islam and the life of Muslims. Within this frame, Leaman then moves on to specific controversies in the life of Muslims, looking at a number of pressing issues relating to nationalism, inequality (gender, slavery, sex), economics, morality, law, education, interreligious relations, belief, Sufism, and entertainment.

There is no chapter specifically on Islam in Europe, but Islam in Europe is dealt with, where appropriate, at some length. So-called “European Islam” appears in the chapter on nationalism, for example, and freedom of expression (cartoons etc.) and sharia in Europe appear in the chapter on law. None of the chapters focus specifically on philoso-

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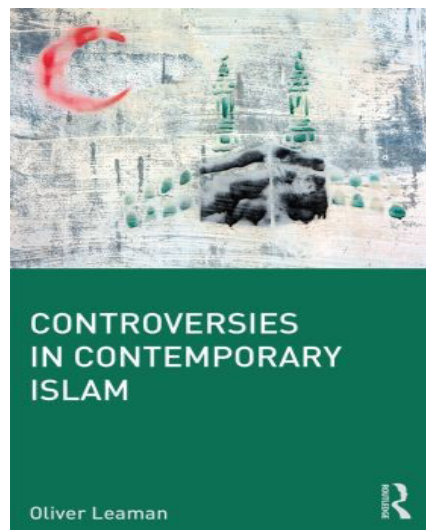
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phy, but as Leaman is a philosopher, philosophical topics are also treated where appropriate, and complex issues are made comprehensible. Philosophy is not, however, overemphasized.

All fourteen chapters are well and clearly written, and achieve interesting discussions without requiring prior knowledge in the reader. Each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading. There are occasional but not exhaustive source citations. There is also a glossary and a useful bibliography. Leaman knows his Islam, and

knows his controversies, and almost never puts a foot wrong.

Controversies in Contemporary Islam, then, is an excellent textbook. It is not quite clear, however, what it is a textbook for. It might serve as an introduction to Islam with a difference, as it covers all the standard topics found in most introductions to Islam, and its novel perspective brings out novel understandings while still transmitting the necessary basic knowledge. While I suspect that some students in an Intro to Islam course would find the book difficult, I would also expect that others would be challenged and enriched by it. *Controversies in Contemporary Islam* might also be used for a more advanced class, with students who had already taken an introductory class. In this case, however, what makes it suitable for use in an introductory class might be a disadvantage, as some students might find its treatment of the basics too basic. There is also the problem that more advanced classes generally deal in depth with a narrow topic, and the topic of *Controversies in Contemporary Islam* is really quite broad—Islam.

Controversies in Contemporary Islam more or less ignores two topics that, while usually little emphasized in general western scholarly works on Islam, are central to the lives of many—perhaps most—Muslims. The book treats both morality and religious practice very superficially. Prayer is mentioned only in passing, and other practices such as fasting are not mentioned at all.

Despite this, the book is recommended. It provides a refreshing new look at familiar topics, and could work well as a challenging introduction for introductory classes, or perhaps in more advanced classes.*

(Sumner: *Journal of Religion in Europe* 8 (2015) 147-152)

Education, Leadership and Islam: Theories Discourses and Practices from an Islamic Perspective

THIS book covers an important topic which, as far as this reviewer is aware, has not been previously covered – namely, addressing the increasingly important subject of leadership from an Islamic perspective, and, in doing so, challenging many of the received assumptions in the literature (the ‘theories, discourses and practices’) on leadership. These latter too frequently assume a language of management – a means/end language – which increasingly permeates a western understanding of education. In doing so, they fail to see the essentially moral dimension of leadership – the distinctive virtues which, in turn, are rooted in a religious ideal and which should be incorporated into the very notion of leadership.

Therefore, this book is important on several fronts and for several reasons. First, of course, it sets out a distinctive ideal of leadership practice based on the Islamic understanding of a good society. That understanding arises from the teaching of the Quran and from the interpretation of the Quran which necessarily takes place over the centuries as it is lived in quite different social and economic contexts. Second, however, it provides a very clear introduction to the central vision of Islam, based on a view of knowledge and of the virtuous life, which is most useful for those whose understanding ‘from outside’ is constrained and distorted by popular media reporting. Teachers in our multicultural schools would clearly benefit as they pursue programmes of religious, personal and social education. But, third, given the importance of the humanities and of history in our understanding of cultural identity, the account (especially in Chapter 1 – ‘Islam, knowledge, education and ideological underpinnings’) provides an excellent background to the Islamic beliefs and practices of

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Penulis

Saeeda Shah

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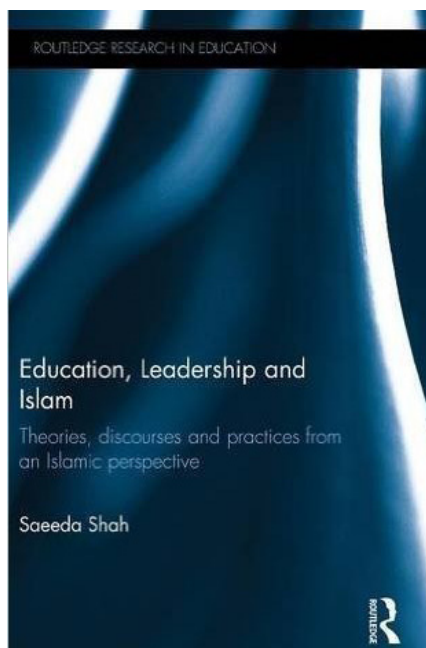
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many young Muslims in our schools, enabling them to attain a greater understanding of their religious and cultural background. These different purposes are put well in the Introduction.

Besides explaining to the Muslims what education and education leadership meant from an Islamic perspective,

the need was equally strong for making an argument to the wider school communities on how education and educational leadership are ideologically conceptualised and constructed from an Islamic perspective.

In that respect, Chapter 1 (25 pages) is the key chapter in the book. There one is shown how that vision, found in the Quran, was articulated in the early and late middle ages by the Arab philosophers, such as Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali (although it is surprising that Ibn Sina/Avicenna is not here mentioned) and the neo-Platonic tradition which they inherited and which permeated their theory of knowledge. That is not unimportant since it links the theory of knowledge articulated here to that of medieval scholasticism, which gained much from these Muslim scholars. What Dr Shah describes here shows how Islam is part of what was once described as the ‘perennial philosophy’, not something as esoteric to the western tradition as is so often popularly assumed.

A key aspect of the tradition and understanding articulated here is the intrinsic link between the pursuit of knowledge, the ‘complete world-view’, the ultimate awareness of the divine presence and the idea of the ‘good life’ – that is the life shaped by virtue. To grasp these connections, reason by itself is not sufficient and there is a need for divine revelation (to be found in the Quran). The ‘end’ of an action must embody what one thinks to be a worthwhile form of life, and the person who pursues knowledge for its own sake will be led to that wider synthesis of knowledge which is to be found in the Quran and ultimately in an understanding of God – howsoever inadequate that understanding might be.*

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