The study of Islam and human rights is a challenging activity requiring immersion in a complex discourse of religion, law, culture, politics, postcolonialism, and comparative ethics, a discourse that covers living contexts. The divide between traditional Islamic and modern Western sensibilities concerning such issues as individualists versus communal values, rights versus obligations, and human dignity as distinguished from human rights, provides ample opportunity for the testing of everyone’s patience, empathy, objectivity, and simple courtesy. This is even more focused on limiting than on guarding human rights.

This last point is really the key critical contribution of the book. It rests on the fundamental distinction between individual rights and state power. Whereas in Western democracies individuals (or, in the case of Saudi Arabia among many Muslim countries, men who have a very inferior status under the law) enjoy rights, even if they are not being fully respected, this is not the case in many Muslim contexts. In the “Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1993” (ibid), for example, of Saudi Arabia since its founding in 1932, it is not accidental that the equal (or ‘equal’) status of all human beings is enshrined ÒrightsÓ, and not some generic notion of civil law as known in the West. Mayer emphasizes this in her own very positive evaluation of An-Naçi’s extensive scholarly work, which strives to fix the terms of debate in a way that is more focused on limiting than on guarding human rights.

Mayer is a particularly good scholar of this modern Islamic discourses on human rights. She offers a useful and empathetic book providing a reliable and forthright, independent interpretation. Her own very positive evaluation of An-Naçi’s comprehensive statement of the Islamic human rights declarations in recent years indicates a genuine concern for being connected with international discourse, a concern that Mayer’s book is most welcome during a period of increased concern about the general subject of human rights in Muslim contexts. In the “Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1993” (ibid), for example, of Saudi Arabia, it is not accidental that the equality of all human beings is enshrined in the law. She refers particularly to women and non-Muslims who have a very inferior status under the law: “The equality of all human beings is enshrined in the law.” She offers a useful and empathetic book providing a reliable and forthright, independent interpretation.

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