Defenders of Reason in Islam

Richard C. Martin

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, many of us in Islamic Studies have found ourselves being asked repeatedly by reporters, students, and even university colleagues to comment on Islamic fundamentalism. Certain assumptions often surface in public discussions of Islam. For example, many reporters (and many of my students and colleagues) believe that Islam is an inherently violent religion. Another assumption I often encounter is the view that orthodox Muslims (Sunni and Shi’i) are medieval, irrational, anti-modern, and dangerously anti-Western intellectually.

A premise of this study is that during the past century very few books have been written about Islam by scholars trained in history of religions or in the specific field of religious studies. Most studies of Islamic fundamentalism written by scholars in the US, for example, have been written by Orientalists, political scientists, public policy specialists, or journalists. We wanted to write about the history of Islamic religious thought today for each of these groups. Our primary target was scholars and students of religion. It is important to note that in North America there are relatively few departments of religion in private colleges and public universities, so the study of Islam is still woefully underrepresented in these departments. A large number of departments still do not offer courses on Islam at all, yet they may cross-list a course in anthropology or political science or history by a Middle Eastern specialist in another discipline to teach about the Islamic religion.

In the introduction, we try to locate the history of Islamic religious thought in relation to the political and cultural dimensions of Islamic and religious studies in the past century. A section entitled ‘From the Project of Orientalism to the Fundamentalism Project’ argues that the Western textual study of Islamic theological texts, and particularly the rediscovery of a number of Muzallim texts in this century in Yemen and elsewhere, has influenced the direction of both the modern study of Islamic thought and Islamic thought itself. Defenders of Reason in Islam challenges the main tenets of the Fundamentalism Project with a renewed attention to Islamic historical and theological discourse, as well as its social context. The study of Islamic religious thought today for each of these groups is a prime target for this book. Our primary target was scholars and students of religion. It is important to note that in North America there are relatively few departments of religion in private colleges and public universities, so the study of Islam is still woefully underrepresented in these departments. A large number of departments still do not offer courses on Islam at all, yet they may cross-list a course in anthropology or political science or history by a Middle Eastern specialist in another discipline to teach about the Islamic religion.

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