

Author:	Brown, Daniel
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Review:

Any convenor of first-year introductory courses on Islam faces a huge variety of textbooks to choose from. While certain introductions are more concerned about the doctrinal development of Islam, others provide historical surveys. Some introductions explicitly opt for a phenomenological approach avoiding a critical evaluation of the historical problems around the origins and early developments of Islam, while others present the main arguments of the so-called revisionist school of the Western academic study of early Islamic history which doubts the reliability of the earliest sources and develops an alternative account of the origins of Islam. History or doctrine, phenomenology or historical criticism, insider or outsider account – these are the options available in the different introductory textbooks on Islam. The ideal textbook would provide a combination of the different topical and methodical orientations - a textbook that would introduce to Islam as a religion, its history and Islamic studies as academic discipline at the same time. Daniel Brown's *A New Introduction to Islam* claims – as the title suggests – offering something novel as a textbook on Islam. For Brown, there is a major lacuna in most introductory textbooks on Islam. While they often provide useful expositions of Muslim dogmas and Islamic history, they do not incorporate recent findings and discussions of Islamic studies, those by revisionist scholars in particular.

Unlike many other textbooks which would begin with the religious, political and social situation of the Arab peninsula at the time of Muhammad, Brown discusses in the first part of the book 'Islamic Origins' the historical context of the wider Middle East in late antiquity as the matrix in which Islam as a religion was formed. The presentation of pre-Islamic Arabia is nicely contrasted with that of the pre-Islamic Middle East in order to suggest that many fundamental beliefs of the Islamic tradition could not have been formed out of the cultural context of the pre-Islamic Arab society but drew much more from the political, cultural and religious traditions of the wider Middle East. The final chapter of the first part of the book investigates the nature of the religious beliefs of the Arab conquerors and of their political institutions illustrating how in the course of Arab rule over the Middle East an Islamic religious identity was gradually formed.

The second part of the book introduces to the actual formation of the Islamic tradition in the Middle East. It contains an introduction to the Koran, the history of its text and its interpretation and its status in Muslim religiosity. A short biography of the Prophet Muhammad is provided as portrayed in the Muslim tradition. This insider account is then contrasted with an evaluation of the nature of early Muslim sources and problems around them. Brown presents the sceptical attitude of scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, Josef Schacht or John Wansborough towards *hadith* literature, the body of traditions which contain sayings and descriptions of activities of the Prophet and also information on the early history of Islam in the generations following Muhammad. Brown's comparison of the insider account of the origins of Islam with the challenges towards its reliability by Western scholars is a nice feat of the book, allowing the reader to gain an understanding of the traditional Muslim view of the origins of Islam and the discussions and controversies in Western academia around the historicity of this view.

The third part of the book covers different Islamic institutions and schools of thought. Brown begins with a survey of the historical development of the caliphate. Instead of providing a dogmatic account of the Sunni understanding of the caliphate, Brown investigates the historical evolution of this institution by comparing the views of religio-political leadership among the different sectarian and political groups of early Islam. Brown also considers external influences like pre-Islamic Iranian notions of divine kingdom which informed the later Sunni understanding of the caliphate. The chapter on the origins and early development of Islamic law starts off with a very refreshing and stimulating description of how Muslim jurists in the 16th century responded to the growing popularity of coffee in the Middle East and discussed the permissibility of this beverage. The legal debates around coffee provide an excellent example to illustrate the methods and arguments used in Islamic jurisprudence before continuing with a presentation of how Islamic jurisprudence itself came into existence. The chapter on Islamic theology and philosophy provides an accessible and comprehensive overview of early Islamic theological and philosophical discourse, the major issues discussed and the positions of the various thinkers and schools that emerged. Sufism is dealt with in its own section in a similar manner.

'Crisis and Renewal in Islamic History' is the title of the fourth and final part of the book. Its chapters cover a vast period of Islamic history from the demise of the 'Abbasid caliphate in the 13th century to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 20th century. The basic approach of this part is to investigate how Muslim scholars and thinkers have responded to political changes in the course of history and made attempts to reform and renew Islam in different historical contexts. Starting with al-Ghazali's doctrinal consolidation of Sunni Islam to the role of the religious scholars in Muslim societies, the section concludes with Muslim responses to Western modernity and European imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The epilogue discusses Islam's place in the post-modern world identifying religious pluralism and tolerance as the main features in the religious climate of the contemporary world which pose major challenges for Muslims today.

The strengths of Brown's *A New Introduction to Islam* lie in its comprehensiveness and accessibility. The book manages to expose the reader the diversity and complexity of the Islamic tradition in the course of its history. Several illustrations and maps help the reader to locate certain events geographically and to visualise important discussions. However, both its comprehensiveness and accessibility are paid with a price. As in such introductory books almost inevitable, the book scratches the surface and provides very basic information on the different issues. Quite often, Brown uses bullet point enumerations to identify the salient points of a chapter. For instance, a list of the major political and religious leaders of the early Shia is provided without any further information. This obviously allows the presentations to be comprehensive but sometimes tends to be a bit simplistic and superficial. In order to balance this tendency, the book provides at the end of each chapter a useful list of further readings on the topic of the chapter. Nevertheless, Brown's approach is indeed novel and refreshing. It not only manages to strike a balance between history and doctrine but also places the doctrinal formation of Islam into its historical context. It illustrates the diversity and development of the Islamic tradition and fuses theoretical expositions with interesting anecdotes serving as points of illustration. Most importantly, Brown does not avoid introducing the reader to controversial questions as raised by recent revisionist scholarship in Islam. Hence, Brown has written an attractive textbook for introductory course on Islam which introduces the students to both the history and doctrines of Islam and Islamic studies as an academic discipline.

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