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## **Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements**

Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion, Volume: 21

*Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021. 794 + xxi pages. ISBN: 978-90-04-42525-5 (hardback) / ISBN: 978-90-04-43445-4 (e-book). €275.00 (excl. VAT).*

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Islam is not a majority religion in any Central or Eastern European country (unless one includes Turkey and, possibly, parts of the Caucasus). It is, however, a minority religion in all of them, and this is arguably a good reason why a collection of essays explaining both the similarities among and differences between the many different strands of Islam can be of particular use to scholars of religion in the region. Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religions provide an invaluable reference source on a wide variety of faiths, and this volume of over 800 pages is no exception, devoting as it does, thirty-three chapters to some of the numerous manifestations of Islam.

There is a helpful introduction by the editors, alerting us to the fact that Islam is not a monolithic, unchanging religion, but one that has undergone multiple innovations, adjustments, and schisms throughout history. This is followed by a survey of the contents, with a short paragraph on each chapter enabling us to get an overall picture of the complexity of the religion in its various manifestations.

The book is then divided into five parts, each having a short orientating introduction: (1) *Sunni Traditions* (including Tablighi Jamā't, the Muslim Brotherhood, Nahdlatul Ulama and the Nusantara Islam movements); (2) *Shi'a Traditions* (e.g., the Twelvers, Ismā'īlīs, Dā'ūdī Bohras, Alevīs, 'Alawī and Heyati movements); (3) *Fundamentalisms and Extremisms* (e.g., the Citadel of Salafism); (4) *Sufism and its Influences* (e.g., the Ni'matullāhi Order, Subud and Gurdjieff "work"); and (5) *'In Between and on the Fringes of Islam'* (e.g., the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple of America). There are some more general papers, with one on Sunni women, in which, beginning with the Prophet's wives, Eva Nisa highlights the enormous diversity of roles that women have played and the variety of ways in which they have been and are perceived in different Islamic communities. Ronald Geaves, who has been studying sectarianism in Islam for years, explains some of the problems of categorization and reminds us that, according to one of the *hadith* narratives, the Prophet said "my community will be split up into seventy-three sects", only one of which will be saved. "The others will perish" (p. 28).

Some of the movements emerged in our lifetime, others trace their roots back centuries. Some, such as the Druze and Yezidis, might not be classified as Islamic. Others, such as members of the Ahmadiyya community, are denounced as not being true Muslims and, as a consequence, suffer persecution in Pakistan. The Bahá'ís, who no longer claim to be part of Islam, are persecuted in Iran. Both Ahmadis and Bahá'ís are, however, not only living in peace but are widely respected in the West. Susan Palmer's vivid description of Dwight D. York's Ansaaru Allah Community, one of the African American Muslim movements that emerged in America in the 1960s, raises the question of just how eclectic a religion can be (embracing, in this case, Mesopotamian and Egyptian mythologies as well as angelic extraterrestrial astronaut theory) while still appearing "to embody the 'real' Islam" (p. 718).

The chapter that is perhaps most obviously of relevance to *RASCEE* readers is that in which Kaarina Aitamurto discusses the situation in Russia, where several minority religions have been banned as "extremist" and where the media, "anti-cult experts," and the Russian Orthodox Church use the highly pejorative term "sect" to refer to non-institutionalized or non-traditional forms of Islam (and, it might be added, of Christianity and other religions). Aitamurto provides a range of examples: "Wahābism" is a term applied to any Salafi trend that is critical of what are considered to be Islamic schools in Russia and/or is believed to have been imported from Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, or the Arab world. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been banned as a terrorist group, despite no evidence of this being found – although its racism just might qualify it as being extremist. Human rights activists and others claim that Aitamurto's third example, Nurdzhular', does not exist – but because several Russian translations of the writings of the Turkish Islamic scholar, Said Nursi (1876-1960), have been banned as extremist, anyone guilty of reading these has been deemed to be extremist and must, therefore, belong to an extremist organization. One reason is evidently because Nursi's writing attempts "to influence the psyche of the reader subconsciously, using mechanisms of religious belief, i.e. the formation of conscious values and convictions with an irrational basis" (p. 467). Another movement, which has been dubbed a misguided sect, a radical sect, and a criminal sect, is the National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM). Very few Russian Muslims actually belong to NORM, which has expressed some right-wing (which presumably includes Western) beliefs and has openly supported the anti-Putin demonstrations of 2012 and condemned the annexation of Crimea.

Aitamurto's final example concerns the Faizrakhmanisty, a "sect" named by non-members after its founder, a Tatarstan cleric, Faizrakhman Sattarov (1929–2015), who called himself a messenger of God. The movement made international headlines when the Russian police raided the compound in which Sattarov and his 70 or so followers lived. Sattarov's writings were pronounced extremist because they were "targeted at transforming the personality of the reader to change his worldview, values, conviction, and manner of behavior" (p. 476). They were also found to "create negative opinions of other religions" (ibid.). Such accusations (which could, surely, be applied to most religions?) resulted in the movement's being banned, which gave the media permission to create all manner of negative, exaggerated, and, not infrequently, false representations of the Faizrakhmanisty. Although such portrayals of minority religions can undoubtedly be considered "extreme" in Russia, they are not unique, and versions of them can be found promulgated, to albeit a lesser extent, throughout much of the rest of Europe.

Caroline Tee's contribution concerns the Turkish scholar Fethullah Gülen (b.1938), who, from an early age, was influenced by the writings of Said Nursi and some aspects of Sufism. For Gülen, "Love is the most essential element of every being" (p. 91) and this, he believes, should be demonstrated through the betterment of humanity, which can be achieved by restoring religious and moral values to society; rather than resorting to political activism, this should be achieved by peaceful and non-confrontational means such as through the provision

of scientific education. Inspired by Gülen's writings, a network of organizations, known as *Hizmet* (service), spread not only throughout Turkey, but to numerous other countries throughout the world. One of his followers is quoted as saying:

*"You're not only a Muslim when you're praying, you're a Muslim when you're living – twenty-four hours a day. That's why I love him (Fetullah Gülen) so much, and why I'm working here in this school. ... I want to do something for this society" (p. 91).*

Her school, however, like all other Gülen-associated schools and organizations, has been closed down since the 2016 attempted coup, for which Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, holds Gülen, his one-time ally, responsible. Despite Erdoğan's attempts to wipe out *Hizmet* and Gülen's influence, the movement continues to educate, organize interfaith dialogue, and provide humanitarian aid in a variety of ways outside Turkey, while Gülen himself continues to write and inspire his followers from exile in the United States.

Chapters such as those on the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hezbollah in Pakistan, Hamas in Gaza, and Boko Haram in Nigeria provide a background contextualization for some of the horrendous conflicts that have occurred in recent years and that, in all too many instances, continue to slaughter and wreak havoc with the lives of innocent civilians. Emin Poljarevic concludes a chapter on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by declaring that it is a fusion of religious, ideological, strategic, and contextual factors resulting in a worldview "driven by the cosmic struggle between perceived believers (ISIS members) and *all others*" (p. 509). But, of course, the number of Muslims involved in violent sects is more than outweighed by the great majority of those who belong to completely peaceful Islamic sects—as is, indeed, evident in much of this volume. Nonetheless, having read Part 3, I was glad that, for a previous *RASCEE* review, I had read and gleaned a ray of hope from Mark Juergensmeyer's magnificent book, *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends*.

It is unlikely that all that many scholars will be able to afford this volume, but they should make sure that they have access to it through their libraries. To repeat, it is an invaluable resource.

## REFERENCES

Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2022. *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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