

# The Many Facets of Islam

*by Steven Duarte*

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**Both as a religion and as a civilisation, Islam is currently beset by a cacophony and a worrying erosion of plurality by its apologists as well as its detractors. The "clash of ignorances" is much more real than the so-called "clash of civilisations".**

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Reviewed: John Tolan, *Nouvelle histoire de l'islam. VIIe-XXIe siècle*, Paris, Taillandier, 2022. 352 pp., €22.

## Introduction

The author has dedicated this book to the younger generations, so does he genuinely expect nothing more from the older generations? The introduction rightly denounces the convenience of essentialism and the harmful use of inappropriate terms that obscure the plurality of the history of Islam and its civilization. Confronted with apologetic rhetoric on the one hand and hate speech on the other, researchers' voices are invaluable today, because they establish a healthy distance, ultimately in order to confirm a simple fact: Islam is essentially neither a violent religion nor a religion of peace—so what could these two opposing views possibly mean? From a scientific point of view, absolutely nothing. As the author points out, the vast majority of classical Islamic law prohibited the consumption of intoxicating beverages but, at the same time, the greatest poets of Islamic civilization described and extolled their pleasures, so we must not confuse the normative truth of legal texts with the reality of societies. This distinction holds true today: slavery has been legally abolished

throughout the world and is certainly morally reprobated globally, yet it still exists in practice.

Apart from a few inevitable typos, this is a very well-crafted book, which achieves its stated aim of presenting a non-specialist readership with a synthesis of works produced by researchers, both from the medieval and contemporary periods.

## A selection of research findings

The author provides a useful introduction to the use of ancient Arabic sources, the importance of oral tradition in seventh-century Arab society (p. 18), the need to distinguish between hagiography and the scientific biography of the Prophet (p. 19), the conflicting opinions of experts as regards the authenticity of some sources (pp. 19-20), the plurality of and sometimes contradictions between the available accounts of well-known events such as the revelation of the Qur'an (p. 20), and the changes in Koranic exegesis over time. For example, according to the Qur'an, which son did Abraham sacrifice? For early Muslim exegetes up until the tenth century, it was Isaac, whereas for later exegetes it was Ishmael (p. 24). The author also reminds us of certain stories that were known to the ancients but often ignored by contemporary Muslims, such as the "Satanic verses" (p. 29), in which the Prophet is said to have recited as a passage from the Qur'an a verse acknowledging the veracity of the intercession of pre-Islamic Arab deities (*ġarānīq*); this account now features in the Qur'anic exegesis of the celebrated tenth-century Sunni scholar Al-Ṭabari, a contentious episode rejected by most traditionists, and which was the subject of a renowned passage in the novel by the writer Salman Rushdie published in 1988.

Here, too, the author provides a timely reminder of the inevitable hybridizations between different cultural and religious spheres that were nevertheless in competition, and even in conflict: Islam's borrowings from the Byzantine and Persian systems (pp. 59-61), which the Caliph Abd al-Malik's monetary reform sought to curb; the overlapping of certain cultic practices relating to the three monotheistic religions (blessings, healings, spell-casting, etc. (pp. 61-63)); the division that is so clear-cut today between Sunnis and Shiites, but was not so clearly established at that time (a famous example is the Shiite imam Ja'far al-Ṣadiq, whose tomb in Medina remained a place of veneration for both Sunnis and Shiites until it was destroyed by the Wahhābites at the beginning of the twentieth century (pp. 76-77)—these facts are

of course well known to specialists, but they now need to be remembered more than ever.

## Instrumentalizing history

The author debunks the common misconception that wine flowed freely in the Abbasid Empire and that the practice was largely accepted. He reminds us (p. 83) that the ulama were hostile to the consumption of intoxicating beverages and that they made this known, which of course did not prevent the powerful members of the court from indulging in the practice and frequenting Christian monasteries in particular (p. 83). This fact alone creates a necessary distinction that is often overlooked between what was done in wealthy circles and the lifestyle of the masses across the empires of Islam: wine and bacchanalian sessions (*mağālis al-ḥamr*) may have been celebrated through song and verse by brilliant poets, including the famous Abu Nuwas (d. 815), but this did not necessarily become common practice.

This point about the consumption of wine is often used by authors acting in good faith who wish to counter religious fundamentalism; however, it is doubly ineffective to rely on such scientifically tenuous arguments because, in addition to the very real distinction at the time between the masses (*āmma*) and the elite (*ḥāssa*), fundamentalist movements had no use for the Abbasid period in any case, as their period of reference was not the eighth to the thirteenth centuries but rather the period between 610 and 661 (which corresponds to the life of the Prophet and the four caliphs).

If we follow the same line of thought, we also encounter another overused idea, both by fundamentalists and by those obsessed with Islam: that the classical civilization of Islam did not separate politics from religion. The example of wine, on the other hand, tends to strongly qualify this assertion made by the media: there was tension between the political and religious authorities, which were in no way merged; the ulemas could condemn the practices of the Muslim elites as much as they liked, but this did nothing to change the legitimacy of the authorities. And if by any chance the political leadership felt threatened by the religious authority of the ulama, it had complete freedom to torture, lock up and dismiss them. The powers were indeed distinct, although not strictly separate; the Christian medieval world also experienced the same tension between these two sources of legitimacy.

Another common misconception shared by both self-righteous apologists and obsessive critics of Islam is that the supposedly immutable notion of *šarī'a* crystallizes misunderstandings and manipulations. Under the Abbasid empire, this term was used by Arabic speakers of the three monotheistic religions to refer to any "legal system established by a prophet" (p. 94); it only gradually came to be used by the ulama to describe the part of religious law considered to be revealed, as opposed to the interpretative work of jurists (*fiqh*). We should remember that the period of the Abbasids coincided with the birth of the classical legal tradition of Islam, during which—most paradoxically—Muslims were still a minority in the vast empire they governed (p. 96), with Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians making up the majority. The sources on this period mention many cases of Muslim parents having their children "baptized by Christian priests", not in order to convert, but because they believed in the efficacy of the baptismal rite (p. 96).

## Through the eyes of Ibn Battuta

I would like to mention here the narrative originality of chapter 6, in which the author chooses to explore the Muslim world of the 14th century through the writings of the famous Moroccan traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. He describes the omnipresence of Sufism (the mystical current of Islam), which structured the daily lives of Muslims. The author recounts Battuta's famed meeting in Damascus with the learned theologian Ibn Taymiyya, the ultimate reference today for the mainstream currents of Sunni Islam worldwide, as well as in Baghdad, when the same traveler reports that Ibn Ḥanbal's tomb had no dome and that, whenever one was built, "it was destroyed by the power of God" (p. 163).

Whatever its authenticity, Ibn Battuta (of Malikite rite) saw this account as a real curse on the rival Hanbali school—a paradoxical reversal since, today, the ulama consider the lack of a dome on a famous tomb to be a mark of strict orthodoxy. It is fascinating to note these major theological changes between the Islam understood by the ulemas in the 14th century and the Islam professed seven centuries later by authors referring to the same past.

Chapter 7 offers a very concise summary of the three main Islamic empires of the pre-modern era. An analysis of their political and strategic alliances quickly reveals something that is, once again, quite basic for any researcher: even in those days,

religion was not the primary driving force behind alliances, and short- and medium-term strategic interests prevailed. So what can be said about our very contemporary age, when religion shapes society's imagination far less than it did in the past?

## Recent history

Chapters 8 and 9 cover the contemporary period, which is so rich that it is obviously impossible to dedicate sufficient space to it in a comprehensive work such as this. The author proceeds in stages, and these are likely to be relevant to non-specialists. Chapter 9, for example, judiciously begins with the original and interesting figure of the Sudanese reformist Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1909-1985). This Sufi campaigner for the anti-imperialist cause also managed to propose a radical reform of the normativity of the Founding Texts, and in particular the Qur'an, arguing that only the verses of the Meccan period should henceforth be authoritative, and not those of the Medinan period, which came after them and were contingent. This laid down a challenge not to the religion itself, but to the whole structure of the Sunni religious establishment and its authority over people's souls. He was executed by order of the Sudanese political authorities, with the active complicity of his country's conservative political movements.

Wahhabism features prominently in this chapter, and rightly so since it is the dominant current in contemporary Sunnism. The author shows that it has had multiple "conveyors of legitimization", both on the part of the British and then the Americans, but also figures as well-known today in contemporary Islam as the Syrian-Egyptian thinker Rashid Riḍa (p. 246) or the Algerian scholar Abdel-Hamid ibn Badis and his famous 1930s journal *Al-Shihab*. Until recent times, from which we have not yet fully emerged, many thinkers such as Rashid Riḍa, and others who were far more critical, were classed solely in the vague category of 'reformers', despite the major discrepancy between their political project and their interpretation of the texts of the classical heritage (*turāṭ*). The author is therefore right to mention that this celebrated figure of early twentieth-century Egyptian Islam evolved into an almost unconditional supporter of the Wahhabism of the young Saudi state, which became Saudi Arabia in 1932, and whose official doctrine was gradually renamed "Salafism". This is always important to emphasize, because this current no longer has anything to do with what many still call "*salafiyya*", which was part of the period that the historian Albert Hourani called the "liberal age of Islam" (nineteenth century to first three decades of

the twentieth century) and which has since come to an unceremonious end—but that is another story.

In view of all the above, it is clear that this book will be of great value to a broad, non-specialist readership, who will be able to enrich their general knowledge with the insights of a broad subject rooted as much in contemporary debates on Islam as a religion as in the long history of Islam as a civilization which, despite the assertions of some amnesiacs, is at least on a par with the Roman and Chinese civilizations.

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