The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World

Edited by John L. Esposito

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Reviewed by Daniel Pipes

The *Oxford Encyclopedia* is a modern work in two senses. First, and most plainly, it deals primarily with topics of the past two centuries. In contrast to the medieval focus of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*—the mammoth reference work published by E. J. Brill and thirty-five years into the second edition only halfway done—the *Oxford Encyclopedia* not only provides entries on up-to-date topics (such as surrogate motherhood and the Muslim Brethren) but it also follows up old institutions (inheritance, *waqf*) into modern times. Particularly helpful is the serious coverage of new Muslim communities in the West and of twentieth-century Islamic thinkers (among the more interesting: Mohammed Arkoun and Hasan Hanafi).

Edited by John Esposito of Georgetown University, the *Oxford Encyclopedia* provides thoughtful and even coverage on many of these matters. Some entries deal with ambitious subjects such as book publishing, dance, and economic development, and convey a sense of the topic in just a few paragraphs. Others deal with arcane topics (Islam in Suriname, the Hujjatiya school of thought) that otherwise would be beyond the reach of most readers. An interested reader might spend hours leafing through the four volumes, and he will consistently find well-presented and informative articles.

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Of course, no matter how complete a reference work may be, some subjects will mysteriously be absent. The Alevis of Turkey, millions strong, seem not even to rate a mention. One would think that Saddam Husayn, though hardly a pious Muslim, would deserve an entry given his Ba'th ideology, his war against Iran, and his appeal to the fundamentalists in 1990–91. The intriguing issue of predestination and fatalism *(jabriya, jahmiya)* is inexplicably absent, as is taxation deemed illegal by the laws of Islam *(maks)*, an issue important for its role in inspiring revolts against Muslim authorities.

The *Oxford Encyclopedia* is modern in a second sense too: in spirit. Like many other reference works in the age of deconstruction, it faces problems of identity and purpose. An encyclopedia used to be a straightforward compendium of known and useful facts. But when scholars increasingly agree that truth depends on one's vantage point (and especially one's gender, race, and class), the encyclopedic function becomes far less obvious. A large number of the 450 contributors to this work would seem to accept the modern notion that objectivity being unobtainable, there's little point in even trying. Instead of aspiring to objective, hard knowledge, one contributor after another offers essays—highly opinionated articles about such subjects as Islamic studies and feminism. Some go further and write naked diatribes. The entry on health care, for example, rails against "Eurocentric scholarship" and interprets the advent of European medicine as a "mechanism of social control in colonized Islamic societies."

As this example suggests, political correctness reigns in the *Oxford Encyclopedia*. Thus, of the two articles that make up the entry on Arabic literature, one is an overview and the other an analysis of "gender in Arabic literature." An essay in the entry on "women and Islam" is supposed to inform about the role and status of women in Islamic law, but it instead tells much more about the author's feminist reinterpretation of that law. "Although certain social and economic regula-

tions in the scripture seemingly favor men," she tells us, "the conditions prevailing at the time of the revelation, which seemed to justify such inequality, have lapsed." Over and over again, we learn a scholar's views of how things should be, not how they are.

Political correctness extends to the theological realm as well. Citing a 1969 book, *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death: A Thematic Study of the Qur'anic Data*, a contributor apologizes about the "unfortunate title and the assumptions behind it." (The title implies, contrary to Islamic tenets, that the Qur'an came from Muhammad, not God.)

Zionism and Israel, as might be expected, fare poorly in a reference work where objectivity is not the goal. In the entry on terrorism, we learn that "[a]rguably, the first modern act of political terrorism in the region was the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1947." Arguably, it wasn't: many incidents of terrorism preceded it. Most famously, the Armenian Dashnak Party captured the Imperial Ottoman Bank's office in Istanbul in August 1896, threatening to kill its hostages unless certain demands were met. Four died directly as a result of this incident, and some six thousand Armenians lost their lives in the resulting massacres. The article on the Arab-Israeli conflict reads like a screed from the PLO, with not even an attempt to appear unbiased. It tells volubly of Palestinians' suffering at the hands of Israelis (discrimination, death) but never the reverse problem. Only one Israeli author—the arch anti-Zionist Simha Flapan—makes it into the bibliography.

The tyranny that reigns most consistently in this encyclopedia, however, is the apologetic one. The crisis of the Muslim world—attested to by every serious analyst of the subject—can hardly be found in the *Oxford Encyclopedia*. Instead, this work reads like a formal presentation for outsiders, hoping they will come away with a good impression. The entry on games and sport offers so unrelentingly upbeat a vision ("Women are sure to be spectators of sports on television in the privacy of their own homes"), even someone who knows nothing about the subject must realize he's being sold a piece of goods.

Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the notorious Palestinian leader, gets whitewashed in the *Oxford Encyclopedia:* the entry for Husayni says, for example, that he tried "to persuade Hitler to pledge support for Arab independence." Really? In a letter dated January 20, 1941, and addressed to Hitler, Husayni appealed for German aid to the Arabs to fight Zionists on the grounds that this would "cause the Jews to lose heart," especially in the United States, and that in turn would prompt Roosevelt to abandon his support for Britain. In other words, if you help the Arabs, the Axis wins the war. That's a lot more than an appeal for help with Arab independence.

Time and again, contributors shield their subjects from criticism. Abbasi Madani, founder of Algeria's fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front, is "known for his moderation." Rashid al-Ghannushi, a radical Tunisian thinker, is not criticized for his murderous plans but praised for his "masterly understanding of western and Islamic philosophies and a genuine concern for reconciling the basic tenets of Islam with modernity and progress." Better yet, he is lauded for his "important intellectual contribution" in "linking westernization with dictatorship"! If an unfortunate phenomenon simply cannot be hidden, it might be explained away. Take the case of violent fundamentalist groups:

> The number of *jihad* organizations has been increasing in the Arab world, and indeed in much of the Islamic world. This fact does not say as much about Islam, as is often assumed in the West, as it says about desperate attempts to exploit Islam politically.

Murderers in the name of Islam, in other words, reflect badly not on Muslims but on the West.

Less serious but still revealing is the fact that sources deemed politically incorrect simply do not turn up in the bibliographies. Of

three recent biographies in English on Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the two favorable ones (by Taysir Jbara and Philip Mattar) are listed, while the critical one (Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti*) is not. The entry on Ayatollah Khomeini omits a 349-page biography by Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, presumably because it's unfriendly to that Iranian "saint." In a similar spirit of objectivity, the son of Elijah Muhammad wrote the biography of Malcolm X. Odder yet is the practice of inviting individuals associated with certain Islamic organizations (the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs or the International Islamic University at Kuala Lumpur) to compose the entries about themselves; not surprisingly, their contributions read like press releases. These entries implicitly signal the message that there is no such thing as objective knowledge, so why even pretend to try?

Vanity bibliographies (in which authors refer to their own writings) further confirm this pattern of excluding unwanted information. One contributor cites himself in five out of ten bibliographic references. Others mention their own work in three out of six items, three out of five, and even three out of four. One author lists no less than seven of his own writings. In one case, a contributor has the amusing gall to call his book "my epic." It's hard to imagine such indulgences in the *Britannica* Eleventh.

The occasional frank word comes as a relief amid this ocean of excuses and evasions. The entry on financial interest does not laud Islamic banking as a brilliant breakthrough but handles the subject skeptically: outside of Iran and Pakistan, we learn, "where Islamic banks exist, their operations tend to rely almost exclusively on camouflaged interest." It is admitted that Maryam Jameelah, the impassioned Jewish convert to fundamentalist Islam, distanced herself from the movement when she realized the depth of its borrowing from the West.

Apologetics, once the preserve of Islamic polemicists, has invaded the universities; that is the unhappy message of the *Oxford Encyclopedia*. The base of knowledge is formidable, but the political constraints are stifling. If only the editor had the wisdom and discipline to rule out politically tinged submissions from his contributors, the *Oxford Encyclopedia* would be an excellent tome. But then, that would be asking for a very different academy than the one we actually have.