

This Is Islam

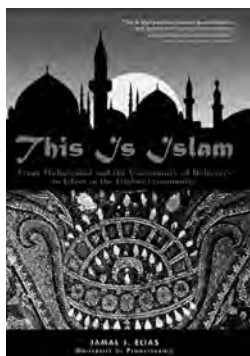
From Muhammad and the Community of Believers to Islam in the Global Community

BY JAMAL ELIAS

GREAT BARRINGTON, MA: BERKSHIRE PUBLISHING GROUP, 2011

152 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1933782812, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Nelly van Doorn-Harder



In one 111 pages, this slim volume takes the reader through the core elements of Islamic teachings and the main moments of Islamic history. It provides an accessible and succinct summary of the larger volumes that are conventionally used in semester-long survey courses on Islam. Although using this long-tested approach, Elias does not shy away from the complex issues within Islamic history, theology, and philosophy. He explains how the various sects came into existence and brings up the complicated theological debates

that continue to influence Islamic views today.

The first three chapters deal with the development of Islam within the tribal context of Arabia and the life and death of the Prophet Muhammad. The next set of three chapters provides the background of the various religious debates that arose as Muslims left the Arabian Peninsula and settled in the lands that were part of a crumbling Roman Empire, many of whose inhabitants belonged to the so-called “People of the Book”: Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians who shared the belief in one God. The next half of the book mainly deals with matters of faith: the basic teachings, prayer, rites, and the application of the moral codes via the Islamic Law. An excerpt of an article by John Voll introduces the reader to the many challenges Muslims face in the modern era (107–111). The book ends with a list of resources for further reading.

When the Prophet passed away without leaving clear instructions concerning who should lead the community after him, a disagreement erupted that resulted in the split between Sunnite and Shi’ite Muslims. The Shi’ites believed that the prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, should lead the community, while others considered him too young and inexperienced. With vignettes listing the differences between the two main groups, including the Sayings of Ali (31, 33, 34), Elias allows the reader to grasp the subdivisions within Shi’ite Islam and understand who the Zaydis, the Twelvers, and the Isma’ilis are.

The encounter with the People of the Book and their philosophical methods of theologizing spurred religious and philosophical debates within Islam that raged during the early Middle Ages. Topics such as free will, whether the Qur’an was created or had existed eternally with God, how to interpret God’s attributes (were his hands and face real or symbolic?), and if those who committed a grave sin should still could be considered to belong to the Muslim community are briefly addressed in the book (53–57).

Apart from the vignettes, “quick facts” rubrics provide the reader with background. For example, a poem by the famous mystic Rumi elucidates the strong emotions Sufi mystics experience when contemplating the Divine (41). Furthermore, little mind teasers help students question their own ideas. For example, how, if at all, would societies change their views

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on Somali pirates if they could agree that their raiding was part of a time-honored and culturally acceptable method stemming from the time before Islam (8)?

This book is a welcome addition to the abundance of introductions to Islam we currently have. It can be read on its own as a quick introduction to the main developments in the religion, or it can serve as extra reading in a survey or upper-level college course on Islamic topics. *This Is Islam* provides a useful overview of Muslim practices and beliefs and thus can serve as an extra tool to help students navigate a complex history. ■

NELLY VAN DOORN-HARDER is Professor of Islamic Studies at Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, North Carolina. Her research straddles issues concerning women and religion and those concerning minorities, minority cultures, human rights in Muslim countries, and the interreligious encounter between Muslims and Christians. Her main fieldwork has been in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, specializing in indigenous Christianity of Egypt and Indonesian Islam. Some of her books include *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995), *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Muslim Women Reading the Qur’an* (University of Illinois Press, 2006), and *The Emergence of the Modern Coptic Papacy, Vol. 3* (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011).

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ISBN 978-0-924304-65-1, Pb: 130 pages.
List Price: \$10 (AAS Member Price: \$8)

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