

Book review: Cyrus Rohani & Behrooz Sabet (eds.), Winds of Change: The Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East and North Africa. (London: Saqi Books, 2019)

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Cyrus Rohani & Behrooz Sabet (eds.), *Winds of Change: The Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East and North Africa*.
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From a Western point of view, one of the key challenges facing us is, how the Islamic MENA region can find peace, modernize and contribute positively to human life on Earth. The Arab spring brought hope for positive changes:

“The Arab spring has awakened the world to the legitimate aspirations of Muslims worldwide to democracy - inspired by western values yet infused by Islamic ideals,” writes Dr. Christopher Buck, an independent scholar and attorney from the USA, in one of his essays in *Winds of Change* (p. 87). Unfortunately, such legitimate aspirations have not yet been met, and the MENA region is as war-torn as ever.

Wind of Change contains 15 essays written by 11 intellectuals with the perspective that Islam’s spiritual ethic and sense of justice has something valuable to offer to the world, as it did during the “Islamic worlds flourishing sociocultural era” (750-1250) (p.8). This period is referred to as the Golden Age.

The editors, management consultant, MBA, Cyrus Rohani and Dr. Behrooz Sabet believe that changes are under way in the Middle East. Rohani writes that dictatorships relegate people “to the level of animals” which “defies the purpose of their creation” (p. 45). At the same time “our planet is suffering owing to our betrayal of the trust bestowed on us as a gift from our Creator” (p. 48). He envisions the “establishment of a planetary civilization based on organic unity of mankind” (p. 49).

Six narratives deal with timely issues such as environmental challenges, press freedom, gender inequality, interfaith dialogue, education and the Arab spring, while the others apply more historical / philosophical perspectives. The latter strive for a common ground on which the Middle East and the West can meet and work together in solving global problems. Generally, the essays are written with a deep appreciation for Islam, a critical view on traditional Middle Eastern leaders, and a taken-for-granted view on the West. The book suggests that there is a need for spirituality, materialism and science to be integrated to create a global society with human dignity, happiness and appreciation of differences.

An interesting example of the search for common ground is Dr. Ian Kluge’s discussion of reason in Islamic and Western philosophy. Kluge, who on websites are presented as Canadian Baha’i scholar, writes:

“The re-appropriation of rationalism is the major goal of numerous Muslim thinkers wishing to revive the fortunes of the Islamic world in face of modern challenges. However, they want to find the basis for such changes in Islam itself without having to depend on ideas imported from, among other things, the European Enlightenment.” (p. 155)

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Islam has the concept of *ijtihad* that, according to one Islamic tradition, implies “free debate on matters to everyone” (p. 145). Kluge quotes the Qur’an for saying: “Indeed, the worst of living creatures in the sight of Allah are the deaf and dumb who do not use reason” (p. 146), and he compares the spirit of this text to Immanuel Kant’s answer to the question about enlightenment (p. 150).

Throughout history, Muslims have disagreed on who should be allowed to practice independent spiritual reasoning and search for truth. Some believe that “*ijtihad* may only be practiced by *mujtahids*,” while others do not agree with this limitation (p. 151). In Islam there is for example a long tradition for reasoning stemming from the Mu’tazali theology of the eight century, modernized by Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Originally the philosophers drew on different sources of inspiration, including Greek philosophy such as Aristotle’s logic of deductive reasoning. However, in the 12th century, the limitations of philosophy were exposed in the book *The incoherence of Philosophers* (p. 161), and the value of ordinary people’s reasoning was questioned by people in power.

Kluge argues that acceptance of individual reasoning and discussions can revitalize Muslim societies. As for international cooperation, he suggests that the “considerable common ground between Kantian understanding of ‘enlightenment’ and what we find primarily in the Qur’an, and secondly, what is offered by Mu’tazalism” (p. 163) can create a shared understanding that will benefit both the MENA region and the West. However, when Muslims use reasoning, they do not necessarily consider Western scientific methods superior, because they do not share the materialistic worldview. When scientists study the material world, their results say obviously little about important spiritual issues.

Buck is the author of three analyses related to norms, ethics and law. One is about good governance, one about the possible development of a shared moral compass for Sunnis and Shi’is, and the third about testing the value of Sharia laws. In each case, the methodology is the same. Buck interprets key Islamic texts and discusses Islamic practices. For example, he interprets basic principles for good governance from a letter written by the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Caliph Ali, who is respected by both Sunnis and Shi’is. This respect is important because his idea is to create a set of shared Islamic guidelines for good governance. He interprets the spirit of each paragraph in the letter and relate it to present-day situations.

In the two other essays the key text is the Qur’an. In one of these essays, he asks: “does Islamic law mirror Islamic ethics”? (p. 169). A Pew Research Center survey cited in his article found that most Muslims in many countries approve of executing apostates. Buck

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writes: “There is a clear contradiction between the sharia law of apostacy and Islamic claims to ‘freedom of religion’ and to a “well-known Qur’anic verse: ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion” (p. 176). Buck then discusses this difference and Islamic scholars’ writings about it.

Many of the essays in this volume can best be considered sincere and informed opinion pieces. Not all of them follow a strict academic form. But they bring fresh ideas and perspectives to important debates.

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