

TO BE A MUSLIM, ISLAM, PEACE AND DEMOCRACY. His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal in collaboration with Alain Elkann. Sussex Academic Press, Brighton & Portland, 2004. Pp. 82. ISBN 1-903900-81-6 (alk.paper), ISBN 1-903900-82-4 (pbk).

This is a compact volume which has a decidedly American flavour in that it was produced in the aftermath of an award of a doctorate in Human Letters to Prince El Hassan by the University of Oklahoma in 2002. It has a foreword and an essay in the afterwords section penned by David L. Boren the President of the University of Oklahoma and a concluding essay in the afterwords section by Ambassador Edward J. Perkins. The main part of the book consists of four sections written by the Prince – Introduction: Appreciating Others' Traditions and Values; To Be A Muslim, The Implications of Islam for Civil Society and Democratization; Postscript: Towards a Universal Ethic of Human Understanding. To Be A Muslim is written in collaboration with Elain Elkann, which, in addition to the third essay are revision updates of previously published material.

Prince El Hassan could be described as the de facto ambassador at large for the Islamic world. One of a handful of intellectuals amongst the Muslim leadership he can match thought for thought with western protagonists. He is also a figure much respected in the international community for his indefatigable efforts to propagate peace and pluralism in an increasingly dangerous world. This book manifests both his intentions and his actions. The core chapter, To Be A Muslim, from which the book takes its title is written in a catechism like format not strange to Muslims. In attempting to answer forty-one questions, which are thought to be of interest to non-Muslims at large, he covers a wide range of issues from prayers to politics and veils to violence. His responses cover the middle ground of Islam and give the reader a solid start to his enquiries. His erudition extends from the Qur'an and hadith literature to the poetry of Ibn Arabi and Rumi.

One is puzzled therefore, given the Prince's keen intellect and breadth of vision that he is missing a point and a very basic one at that, in his analysis. Islam posits a worldview and a value system that is diametrically opposite to that of the West: Islam in its very expression is the human submission to the will of the Creator and the secular West that of dominating everything that there is in creation. The deeper Muslims allow themselves to be ingested into the bowels of this whale, greater the likelihood of their Islam being diluted by the corrosive acids of secularism. One also needs to be aware that we are playing the game of dialogue to rules determined by a dominant, hegemonistic civilisation that has succeeded in obliterating other civilisations and cultures and are now frustrated by an entity, Islam, that refuses to lye down. The language of peace, democracy and civil liberties must be seen in this context and the sincerity of the West, in this case America, with whom the Prince is in dialogue, can be clearly established by what they have been doing (at the behest of their Zionist proxies) to the Palestinians for over fifty years. Israel was established by terrorism and ethnic cleansing and he must know that the terrorism that some freakish "Islamic" groups subscribe to was born here and continues to be the nursery of hatred that is spreading like a cancer. Where there is no Justice there is alienation and desperation. In this sense the Prince's response to the question on terrorism (p.16) verges on the inadequate.

The Prince feels his way in his essay on democratisation and one gets a sense that he is advocating “Westminster-style democracy” (p. 35) for the Muslim world. But this is a common mistake made in the assumption that its definition is validated by current practice, which is of course not the case. Democracy today thrives on mass gullibility where people are sedated by consumeristic life styles, manipulated by media spin and controlled by taxation and technology. If one goes by the American experience power manifestly does not lie in the hands of the people. By contrast, the Prince’s own encapsulated description of how Islamic societies functioned (pp. 38, 39, 40) describes a form of democracy much nearer the core of the ideal: minimalist governance, true pluralism and considerable individual autonomy reflected in the sentence, “... traditional Muslim society...”. There were no political parties beholden to big business and no powerful lobbies in this system. The Prince refers to the Constitution Of Medina (p. 38) but puzzlingly the term *shura* is conspicuous by its absence in this tract.

Given that we are now stuck with the present global order here is another test of the sincerity of the West. Reform the United Nations Organisation which has been singularly unhelpful to the Muslim world ever since it dissected Palestine and created the state of Israel. Abolish the anachronistic Security Council veto, which is as undemocratic as anything we can imagine and reconstitute this council to be more representative of the people of the world.

It is apparent that Boren and Perkins, the writers of the two final pieces in the book, had taken crash courses in Islam and it shows. They are euro centric in their approach and brush away much of the imperial history of the past 500 years when Muslim populations were conquered, humiliated and brutalised. Much the same happened to the rest of the people of this planet; large swathes of them, if not wiped out, were christianised and then democratised – witness the Americas. Wither the natives? Where has democracy got them and their wealth? The partiality of the Boren analysis is demonstrated by his attitude to the Algerian experiment in democracy in 1992 when Islamic parties were denied the victory they gained through the ballot box. He describes them as “menacing” (p. 57) without any explanation; so who defines democracy?

The presentation by Perkins appears to be more balanced of the two. At least he understands that “the Israeli – Palestinian struggle has been the major nutrient for radical Islam’s growth and strength” (p. 72).

In spite of these observations the dialogue, which the Prince is attempting to establish with the West, is timely and in this people like Boren and Perkins (their prejudices apart) who are positively disposed towards Muslims are essential stepping-stones to the creation of deeper mutual understanding. Attitudes can only be changed by engagement. But, it is crucial for Muslims involved in these activities to understand firstly, that the West will never rest until it has designed the entire world in its own image and secondly, that the western system is itself facing a deep crisis; a crisis manifested by massive social and environmental collapse. At this time in human history fresh thinking about how to organise society is urgent if not imperative. Islam has a substantial contribution to make in this area and not simply as an agenda item layered into the hegemonic discourse.

This is a little book with a big purpose and it manifests the energies invested by one person in a daunting undertaking. The vital Islamic contribution to this dialogue of civilisations would be the missing element of justice. It merits more than the brief paragraph (p .34) devoted to it and one would urge the Prince to bring all his energies to bear in pushing this to the top of the order of priorities, for without it neither peace nor democracy can prevail. One can only hope at this stage that the Prince is adequately supported as there is much at stake.

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