

RETHINKING ISLAM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD by
Carl W. Ernst, *Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, Pp.*
xxv + 244, £15.99 pbk

Carl Ernst's *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary world* is, in many ways, an original work both in its outlook and in the way the various topics are treated. The author is a renowned scholar, especially in the field of Islamic mysticism, and I had the occasion of meeting him at a conference on the same subject in Turin some two years ago.

I took up reading this work just after I had finished Irshad Manji's book *The Trouble with Islam*. I could not have encountered a starker contrast between the two. Manji, a Muslim dissident and declared lesbian, ends her work with a chapter entitled *Thank God for the West*. The first two chapters of Ernst's book, on the contrary, contain a sustained indictment of what he perceives as European colonialist and/or American prejudice against Islam whose roots according to him lie in medieval Christian views of Islam reinforced by centuries of colonialism. The author's charge of prejudice is understandable given his account (pp. xiii–xiv) of the reasons for having a sense of urgency in publishing this present work. Whether his accusations against the West are fully justified is an altogether different question.

It is true that colonialism did breed a mentality of a superior occupying power set against an inferior occupied country, but centuries of Ottoman rule did very little to reject such vision. He points to the constant hostility of Western Christendom to Islam, especially from the time of the Crusades right up to the 17th century, as an example of ignorance and prejudice. One could hardly expect a favourable account of Islam at a time when Muslim armies were dismantling the Byzantine Empire, invading mainland Europe and besieging Vienna. It also appears to the author that, whereas Christians have always used violence against Muslims (as well as against Jews and heretics), the reverse has rarely been the case.

One should not measure Islam's performance solely by its treatment of its religious predecessors (here one should also include Hinduism), but also by its treatment of splinter groups and sects within and originating from it such as the Shi'a, the Ahmadiyya (to which he refers on pp. 204–205) and the Baha'i. In some countries, especially those in the region of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, Muslim authorities' conduct with such movements could hardly be considered as blameless. It is true that Christian communities in Muslim countries are still alive, but they had to pay – and still do – a heavy and painful price. For centuries under the Ottoman Empire they were not even permitted to repair their churches let alone build new ones. It is true that for many centuries Christian authors have denigrated the prophet of Islam, applying adjectives and metaphors

that are contemptuous, whereas Muslims have always held Jesus in high regard as a prophet. The bone of contention however has not been so much the person of Jesus as much as his status and his death on the cross which is flatly denied by the Qur'an. A cursory glance at Muslim apologetical treatises, both medieval and modern, attests to the way the mystery of the cross, which is central to Christianity, was and still is held in contempt.

In Chapter 3 Ernst handles themes concerning the sacred sources of Islam, its ethics and especially its rich spiritual heritage, with sensitivity and expertise, fulfilling in the main his intention to offer 'a sympathetic yet reasoned and analytical view of the Islamic religious tradition and analytical view of the Islamic religious tradition and the contemporary issues that Muslims face' (p. xii). His masterly presentation of the personality of Muhammad as legislator ('the Muhammad of authority') and as exemplar ('the Muhammad of grace'), as well as the role of the Qur'an and its evolving interpretation in the history of Islamic thought is indeed the fruit of years of teaching and personal reflection. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the ethical and moral dimensions of Islam. What is very interesting here is the way he depicts the interplay between Greek philosophy as interpreted by Islamic scholars of renown and Qur'anic thought. The latter part of the chapter is dedicated to the status of women in Islam. Here the author argues that Muslim women enjoyed certain rights (such as the right to personal property) that women in the West have only fairly recently begun to enjoy. It is regrettable that he did not also mention the fact that Muslim women are still barred from marrying outside their faith as this is considered tantamount to apostasy. As for divorce, this is usually granted by civil courts in most Muslim countries by the *will* of the husband or at the *request* of the wife, although some do admit mutual consent of both. The way these terms are applied does not exactly reflect gender equality. Chapter 5 is devoted to the role of spirituality in Muslim life. He outlines by means of brief but incisive reflections the way spirituality pervades all areas of Muslim life and the way it is expressed, from acts of devotion to art and architecture. He describes the flourishing of spiritual orders and movements and their varying degrees of influence in political life.

The postscript provides much food for thought. After an initial reference to the colonial mentality that produced the notion of a superior West in contrast with a primitive East, Ernst argues that this mentality has now been taken up and perpetuated by Muslim extremists. We are now spectators to a process of redefining Islam as ideology. Furthermore, Muslim fundamentalists, who are a minority in their own countries and who dismiss Europe and the United States as corrupt and weak, are applying globalized media technology originated and developed by both continents in order to spread and drive home their message to a Western audience. It is here that the

author asks a challenging question: Who is entitled to define Islam? Its diverse currents and movements attest to the dynamism of this religion. Our understanding would be impoverished if we took the fundamentalists for normative and succumbed to their view of Islam as a homogeneous religion that discourages dissident views for being cracks in a monolithic structure. On the other hand Muslims have the right to develop their own political, cultural and social structures without having Western norms imposed upon them, as if these were ideal and universal.

He sees encouraging signs of Muslim creative activity in the increasing use of the novel and recently the Internet, in order to elaborate new images of Islam and communicate the rich diversity of Islam. Will all this lead to mutual understanding and enrichment between Islam and the Euro-American world? With the author, I would like to think so.

JOSEPH ELLUL OP

THE FILMGOER'S GUIDE TO GOD by Tim Cawkwell, *Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2004, Pp. v + 170, £10.95 pbk.*

The word in the trade is that books on religion and cinema do not sell, but this book deserves to do well. Tim Cawkwell has had a long history of watching and making films; he knows the industry from the inside. Here he has taken a number of theological themes including 'God's Grace and God's Silence', 'Faith, Salvation', 'Guilt', 'Crucifixion', 'Resurrection' and has shown how they have been treated in a number of films. His treatment offers sufficient detail without going into extensive analyses but he does avoid the shallowness typified by the identification of unlikely figures like Shane and Arnold Schwarzenegger as 'Christ-figures' that spoils a good deal of the theological writing about film.

The author's choice of films does not pander to the popular cinema-goer; the directors Cawkwell most admires are Dreyer, Rossellini, Bresson and Tarkovsky. This is not a surprising choice, indeed it is admirable, but you are not likely to see DVDs of the first three in your local HMV store nor are you likely to see those three on television or even in a cinema, certainly not outside London. But do not despair, those with a serious interest in film will have seen some Bresson and Tarkovsky and maybe Rossellini and the author also gives serious attention to more popular and widely available movies such as *O Brother Where Art Thou* and *The Night of the Hunter* ('Salvation'), *Brighton Rock* ('Violence') and *American Gigolo* ('Guilt'). The chapter on Faith is devoted to Tarkovsky's parables of the boy who makes the bell and restores Andrei Rublev's