

Book Review: Encounters With Islam: On Religion, Politics and Modernity

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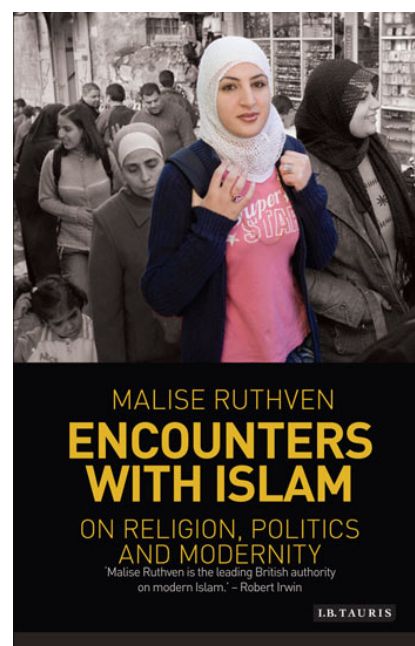
Malise Ruthven is recognised as one of foremost commentators on the Islamic world and its relations with the predominantly secularized and Christian societies of the West. In *Encounters With Islam* he seeks to offers astute and topical insights across the whole spectrum of Middle East and Islamic studies. These essays will be widely appreciated by students, specialists, and general readers, finds **Marco Scalvini**.



Encounters With Islam: On Religion, Politics and Modernity. Malise Ruthven. I.B. Tauris. 2012.

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Encounters With Islam is a collection of almost 30 essays and reviews written between 1981 and 2011 by [Malise Ruthven](#) for a variety of publications including *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *London Review of Books*, and *The Guardian*. Bringing them all together for the first time, Ruthven aims to provide an incisive understanding of the key political and religious issues facing the Middle East and the troubled relationship between Islam and the West, covering historical events such as the Iranian revolution, societal issues such as the problems posed for Muslims as minority immigrants living in Western countries, and a retrospective of the Rushdie's affair 20 years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Such a wide variety of topics alongside general overviews of several key works and authors in the field combine to make a review of this book a little problematic, so for this reason I have focused on what I believe to be the main contribution that the book brings to the study of Western anti-Muslim rhetoric: the Muslim as 'the Other'.



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Part One reviews some of the controversies engendered by the Clash of Civilisations debate, sparked twenty years ago with the publication of Samuel P. Huntington's controversial essay, '[The Clash of Civilizations?](#)' The essay, which later became a book, argues that the world is divided into cultural blocks, each with its own distinct set of values. The Islamic civilization, Huntington wrote, is the most bothersome for the West as Arabs do not share the same ideals of the Western world, and can be defined as hostile to liberal values such as pluralism, tolerance, and democracy.

In the essay 'Politics and the Prophet', Ruthven challenges Huntington's thesis by relating Michael Gilson's fieldwork on the patriarchal culture of Islam to Fred Halliday's *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*. Gilson observed the assertion of power through violence of a Muslim village in Lebanon and the obsession with gender and status. However, Gilson argues that these masculine values characterise many non-Muslim societies of the Mediterranean area and cannot be related either to a specific characteristic of Islamic culture or texts. According to Halliday, the appeal of Islamist movements in the Middle East should instead be connected to the lack of economic development and political change caused by the crisis of post-colonial transition. In his analysis of confrontational rhetoric of both Islamic and anti-Muslim positions, Halliday points to the intellectual similarity of both 'Huntingtonians' and militant 'Islamists'.

Ruthven claims to not completely reject Huntington's thesis, yet the first part of this book offers several perspectives on why the simplistic reduction of Islam as an opposite or Other should be challenged. Ruthven notes Jack Goody's *Islam in Europe*, Carl W. Ernst's *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in The Contemporary World*, and Bruce Lawrence's *New Faiths, Old Fears* as discussions from different disciplinary traditions that highlight the commonalities between Islamic and Western cultures.

Ernst argues that the rejection of Islam as an integral part of Western society lies in a narrative deeply-rooted in centuries of reciprocal confrontation with Islam. Ernst rejects that these differences are irreconcilable, and supports an Islamic-Christian model of civilization in which Islam and the West are "historical twins whose resemblance did not cease when their path diverged" (p. 13).

To support Ernst's thesis, Ruthven introduces Tariq Ramadan's book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Ramadan is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, and in his book emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of Western Muslims and advocates a hermeneutic study of Islamic texts and a contemporary re-interpretation of some Islamic tenets. Ramadan commits to develop a Western Muslim syncretism aimed at integrating the core principles of Islam with occidental values. In particular, Ruthven discusses how Ramadan addresses Muslims to avoid self-segregation and presses them to become model citizens. Lawrence also offers examples of the ways in which Islam in the West is by no means always antagonist and immutable. In his examination of south-Asian immigrants in America, Lawrence observes the adoption, not rejection, of new local norms and values.

In Part Two, Ruthven explores further the "myth of confrontation" by focusing on terrorism and counter terrorism strategies in the war on terror. Although the author claims that it would be wrong to deny that there is also a religious dimension in modern terrorism, much of this confrontation between Islamists and the West is based on ideological assumptions, in which terrorists seek justification for their actions in the scriptures (p. 42). Conversely, the strategy against terrorism adopted by the West is also deeply constructed on wrong perceptions of Islam and a misunderstanding of the real causes of terrorism. In addition, the author offers valuable elements of linguistic reflection on the West which reproduce and reinforce some ideological views. For example, the definition of terrorism is based on a slippery classification (p. 44), how the concept of the 'war on terror' (p. 45) was based on an absurd metaphor or how the attribution of Muslim to terrorist attacks is always instrumental, as the media do not label for example, the Oklahoma City bombing as Christian (p. 51).

In conclusion, the book is carefully organised and offers a very good starting point for the study of the relationship between Islam and the West. Offering an overview of the work of some key authors in the literature, it will certainly be appreciated by general readers looking for a variety of perspectives on topics which are seldom out of the media and academic spotlights. For well-read social scientists generally looking for more detail and evidence however, these essays lack the traditional bibliographic notes, and references and do not follow an academic style.

Marco Scalvini is a [LSE100](#) Class Teacher. His background includes also professional experience as a media professional in public and political communication (UNESCO, OSCE, UN, G8/G20). His PhD thesis is based on a discourse analysis of the public debate on Islam in Europe. It critically reflects on the apparent incongruity between the affirmation of universal citizenship norms and the portrayal of Muslim migrants as a contemporary threat to European cohesion and stability. He tweets [@marcoscalvini](#) and more information about him is available on his [LSE profile](#). [Read more reviews by Marco](#).