

Book Review: Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction

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*This volume covers central themes of Islamic thinking such as the caliphate, Shari'a, the life of Muhammad, jihad, and the Qu'ran. **Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction** addresses how modernity, minorities, and women's rights relate to the Islamic intellectual tradition, writes **Ed Jones**, who finds this book to be mandatory reading for anyone hoping to understand the core themes behind the contemporary uses and abuses of Islamic traditions of political thought.*

Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction. Edited by Gerhard Bowering. Princeton University Press. 2015.

This introductory book should be mandatory reading for anyone hoping to understand the core themes behind the contemporary uses and abuses of Islamic traditions of political thought. When governments discuss the value of [substituting the term ISIS with the term Daesh](#) during political debates and in media reports they are really acknowledging the weight of rhetoric. The [strong response](#) from 280 academics against the UK Government's Prevent strategy to avert radicalisation bemoaned the plan's presumption that ideologies – not socioeconomic factors – are to blame for extremist tendencies. In this way, a heightened awareness of the uses of propaganda, the limits of ideologies and the nature of Islamic political thought is a necessary step towards understanding public policy throughout the world.

Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction is made up of sixteen chapters adapted from articles written by leading experts in Islamic philosophy in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Islamic Political Thought*, which cover central themes of Islamic thinking such as the caliphate, Shari'a, the life of Muhammad, jihad, and the Qu'ran. It addresses how modernity, minorities, and women's rights relate to the Islamic intellectual tradition. Covering both the history and the contemporary dimensions of these themes is a palpably difficult task, and some of the most compelling sections are those that are more limited in scope and examine the intricacies of dynamics such as fundamentalism, revival and reform, and the nature of knowledge in Islam.

In her exploration of fundamentalism, Roxanne Euben outlines interpretations of the term's fluid and symbiotic relationship with modernity, as she suggests that some see fundamentalists' restorative aspirations as "less exhortations to recreate the past than rhetorical techniques designed to indict the present", but ultimately favours the view that Islamists draw both on modern themes and technology to construct their views. In Euben's view, the theme of the corruption of morals by Western modernity is used as the basis for the Islamist rhetoric of diagnosis and cure, and to validate their "politics of authenticity", which rely on their claim to understanding and delivering the faithful message of Islam in a world where the religion's true meaning has been lost.

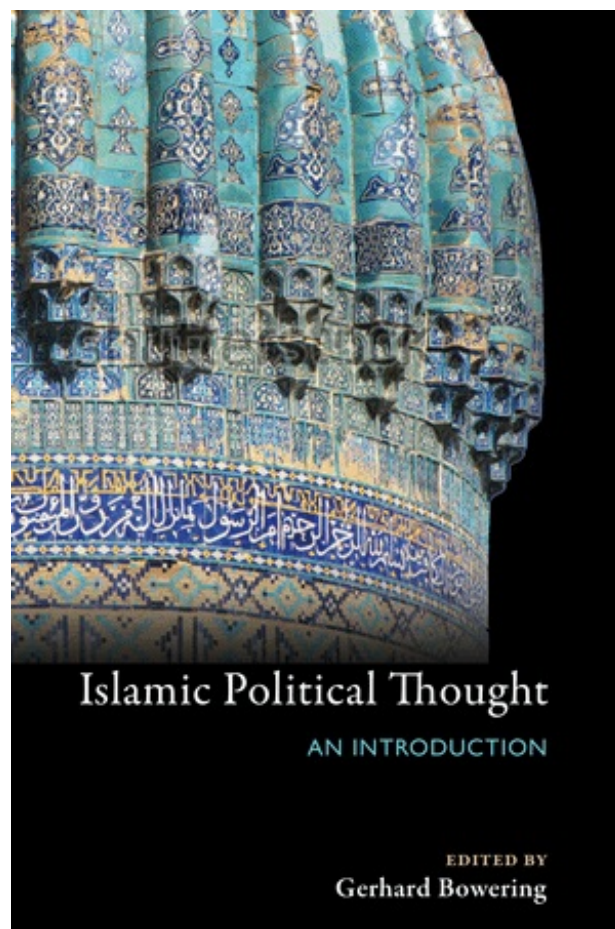




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While sociological frameworks abound, the two chapters that best address the core of Islamic political thought are the late Patricia Crone's chapter on Traditional Political Thought and Paul L. Heck's analysis of knowledge in Islam. Their strength lies in their ability to get to the heart of a theme that is touched upon to various degrees in other chapters: the negotiated relationship between God, knowledge and authority. Today, the sacred space that bridges morality and learning with legitimate leadership of the community has become the desired object of conquest by competing factions. What is important to remember is the longstanding tradition in Islamic political thought behind the reconciliation of these values and the sheer variety and depth behind ideas that have aimed to address these issues for centuries. As Heck points out, revealed knowledge coexisted with alternative methods of acquiring knowledge, and "Muslims, past and present, have been wary of calls for religiously perfect rule, seeing perfection (...) as spiritual, not political". After all, Jonathan Israel has pointed out Enlightenment thinkers such as Pierre Bayle extensively praised Islamic thinkers of the early 1000s for their views on rationalism and their criticisms of superstition.

It is rather regrettable that the authors of each chapter failed to read each other's work and edit their entries accordingly prior to the publication of this book. The reader can certainly draw some very interesting connections between chapters, but one is left with a sense that greater mutual awareness would have lent the volume more weight. For example, Euben's thoughts on the appropriation of tradition relate to Moosa and Tareen's brilliant analysis of the themes of revival and reform in Muslim thought. Moosa and Tareen carve out the importance of political theology in Islamic reform, and emphasise the perennial role of the learned tradition as the arbiter between newness and integrity. The lack of interaction between authors also leads to more obvious flaws. Only in the chapter on the Qu'ran is the reader informed that the term jihad receives only four mentions in the Qu'ran, and that the meaning of jihad in most of these instances is related to a pre-Islamic tribal perception that one must demonstrate oneself deserving of a god's reward through hardship and humility. The important point that jihad became associated with warfare, particularly in post-Qu'ranic interpretations, comes after an entire chapter focuses exclusively on the term's ties to warfare. The chapters on authority, the caliphate, and government could have also benefitted from a closer interaction, but ultimately provide a welcome variety of approaches to the analysis of power in Islam.

While the authors' asymmetrical attention to past and present is problematic throughout the work, as a whole this book successfully combines approaches from political theory, conceptual history, history of political thought and sociology. Its eclectic outlook is fitting for a volume that aims to provide an introduction for the public and academics alike into general themes within the Islamic tradition and their impact on today's world, and in some instances even

allows the work to go beyond what one would expect from a standard introduction.

Studies such as this carry many implications for the study of political thought. While scholars such as Anthony Black have already called for a closer connection between the study of what is understood to be Western political thought and Islam's own, this is a point worth repeating. This reader hopes that one day the work of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who pointed out how eschatology had been used for political ends throughout history, will be as well known to historians of political thought as that of Lorenzo de Valla (1407-1457) and his linguistic breakdown of the Donation of Constantine.

Ed Jones graduated from the LSE in 2013 and holds two MAs in History. He will start his PhD on Early Modern Spanish political thought in 2016, after a year of teaching in China.

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