

Introducing Islam, by William Shepard, New York, Taylor & Francis Inc./Routledge, 2009, pp. xviii + 333, £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-45518-3

William Shepard's new book is a comprehensive overview of the Islamic faith, including the beliefs and practices of Muslims worldwide. A retired Associate Professor of Religious Studies from Canterbury University (New Zealand), he successfully covers nearly every issue and point imaginable in a concise and accessible manner without losing any of the gravitas of the subject material. This impressive book is an excellent exordium to Islam and will serve as a useful companion for students. It distinguishes itself from the current swell of guide books introducing Islam to non-Muslim audiences through a carefully nuanced articulation of opinions that are not only well expressed, but also extrapolate an informed and sophisticated vision of the religion.

Following the opening chapter, the book comprises 19 chapters subdivided into three parts. Part One examines the history of the Muslim community with chapters covering the Hellenistic-Iranian world, Arabia, and the history of Islam to 1700 CE. In Part Two Shepard proceeds carefully and methodically to explore various aspects of Islam with chapters on the Qur'an, Muhammad, the rituals and ceremonies of Islam, community structure and politics, and chapters entitled 'Those who know: scholars and learning', 'To know God's will: Islamic law', 'Theology and philosophy', 'The path to God: Sufism and wisdom', 'Three major figures: a philosopher, a scholar-mystic, and a reformer' and 'Culture and counter-culture: literature and other arts'. Part Three examines modern developments and ranges through issues of modern challenges such as Western imperialism and Muslim responses and a series of case studies that include Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Indonesia, with a concluding chapter on globalization.

Each chapter is well structured with the student reader clearly in mind. Chapters end with a summary of key points, useful and practical discussion questions, and a short bibliography for further references. The author's selection of subjects happily pushes the boundaries of what is normally presented in similar textbooks and certainly enhances comprehension with a good deal of invaluable and tactfully expressed insight. For all its comprehensive coverage, however, more might have been written about Muslim women. And in discussing the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikwān al-Muslimūn*) more mention might have been made of their profound influence outside Egypt and outside the Arab cultural orbit – the *Mladi Muslimani* and a young Alija Izetbegovic in Yugoslavia during the 1940s, for example.

Historically, Shepard explores the usual Caliphs and imams, scholars and philosophers, poets and princes; but rather skims over the villains, heroes (and heroines!), adventurers and eccentrics, who have inhabited the world of Islam for over 1,400 years. I would have enjoyed reading more about the Muslim pirates of the Mediterranean during the medieval period, for instance. Nevertheless, whilst certainly exploring some fairly arcane topics, Shepard continually remains focused, accurate, factual and singularly persuasive. This book will appeal mostly to academic readers, especially first-year university students, although a wider lay readership will certainly find it manageable. This well-articulated presentation of Islam is encyclopaedic but also very approachable – appropriately academic, but not mind-numbingly verbose with it. It is an ideal textbook, for introductory texts often run the risk of becoming as repetitive as the Mandelbrot set, but here the author, succinctly and successfully, articulates the issues in an accessible vernacular idiom. Reading good academic books is very much about both information and enjoyment, and ideally literature introducing major world religions should be both educational and a pleasure to read. Shepard has scored well on both.

