

**Islam: a short guide to the faith**, edited by Roger Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa, Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK, William B. Eerdmans, 2011, x + 177 pp., \$20.00/£12.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8028-6600-4

Editors Roger Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa have assembled a wide range of scholars from disparate academic institutions in North America and Europe, including the ever entertaining and much under-rated Professor Ahmet T. Karamustafa of the Washington University in St Louis, contributing a myriad of articles on a surprisingly wide variety of subjects. The book opens with a perceptively effulgent Foreword by Bruce B. Lawrence, which at times reads like Sun Tzu: 'no believer operates in isolation' (p. ix). Interestingly the focus of this little book, in contrast to many modern apologetic materials and similar 'Introductions to Islam', is strictly on the religion in its simplest sense. Islam as a culture or as a broad source of inspiration for the arts, literature or architecture, is either ignored or skimmed over only very cursorily. The emphasis here is on faith and belief, not politics or platitudinous political discourse. Consequently, and perhaps refreshingly, there is no time lost trying to explain 9/11 or contextualize Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

However, this also means there are some gaps for contemporary readers and the usual didactic meta-narratives and complicated historical contours for this kind of book are severely compressed. For instance, Ataturk is mentioned only twice and in passing, with reference to his abolishing the Caliphate. There is no extrapolation on his radical conceptualization and application of secularism and the nation-state in a Muslim society. In view of events across the Arab world at present, this is perhaps a pertinent and unfortunate omission.

The chapters are fairly succinct and several are very short – sometimes surprisingly so: chapter 4, 'Hadith and Sunna' by Scott C. Lucas, is only three pages long. Perhaps one of the more inspired is 'Islam and Judaism' by Mark S. Wagner, who examines and summarizes the 'creative symbiosis' (p. 116) between the two faiths over the past 1,400 years. His chapter is divided into sections on scripture, law and theology, philosophy and science, mysticism, and a brief review of the various Jewish academic scholars of Islam, such as Ignaz Goldziher. Wagner reminds readers of the enormous and on-going overlap that existed until 1948. Historically, the dexterous interplay between Islam and Judaism demonstrated a truly remarkable degree of variety and complexity.

This authoritative and intellectually munificent book, 15 chapters by 16 insightful and persuasive authors, adds little that is particularly new or exciting to scholars or experienced teachers. However, it contains an excellent Glossary and a comprehensive Bibliography, and one must concur with Lawrence's puissant Foreword: 'the following chapters are well-crafted and highly accessible essays that depict the broad elements, together with the specific accents, that make Islam like other religions, but also distinctive in its historical and contemporary expression' (p. xii). This volume is a real cornucopia of academic perspectives expressed in layman's language. As such, it stands as a first-rate introduction and guide to the religion of Islam for first-year students, members of the general public and others with little or no knowledge of the subject matter.