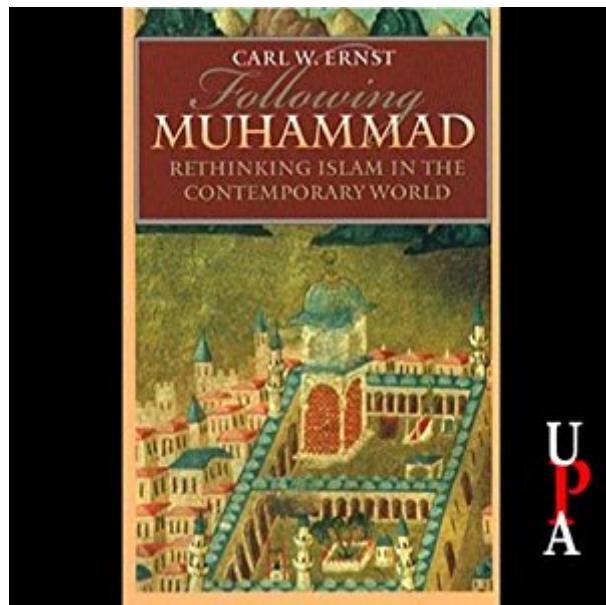


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Following Muhammed: Rethinking Islam In The Contemporary World



Synopsis

One out of five people in the world is Muslim; only 18 percent of those, however, are Arab. Ernst moves away from a Middle Eastern bias, addressing the pluralistic nature of Muslim societies and thought. Framing his argument in terms of religious studies, Ernst describes how Protestant definitions of religion and anti-Muslim prejudice have affected views of Islam in Europe and America. Ernst also covers the contemporary importance of Islam in both its traditional settings and its new locations, and provides a context for understanding extremist movements like fundamentalism. With translations of selections from Islamic texts, some appearing in English for the first time, Ernst offers access to Muslim voices and key themes, particularly the central role of the Prophet Muhammad. He concludes with an overview of critical debates on important contemporary issues, such as gender and veiling, state politics, and science and religion. A concise selected reading list provides a helpful guide for future study. This engaging introduction to Islam should be every non-Muslim's first resource for learning about a religion that is a major presence in the world. The book is published by The University of North Carolina Press.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Following Muhammad," the way Ernst sees it, is a book that fills a special niche. Although solid scholarship on Islam is available, it is often rendered inaccessible by impenetrable prose and circulated in very narrow academic circles through specialized journals. On the other hand, commercial publications approach the topic from the sensationalist angles and too often betray

ideological attack agendas. What Ernst tries to do in "Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World" is to offer the lay reader a balanced, unimpeachably scholarly but thoroughly accessible, fair-minded but critical introduction to the religion of roughly one fifth of the world's population. By extension, the book sheds light on many of the references, and some of the misperceptions, that have become common currency in the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations. If September 11 influenced the presentation of the book, it is "to highlight how we have constructed the notion of religion in recent history around the ideas of competition and confrontation, since all too often this modern world-imperial concept of religion is allowed to pass unexamined." For too many people, confrontation is the only way they have heard Islam described, he points out, and the culture of mass media today tends to create the notion that the present is the only time worth considering. Ernst therefore devotes the first part of the book to the interplay between religion and history across the ages, and traces the evolution of the long relationship between Islam and the West from the Middle Ages through colonial times to the present.

Simply put, this is a well written and informative book that I would whole-heartedly recommend to anyone interested in Islam, especially someone approaching the subject for the first time. Ernst begins the book by looking at how Islam has been misunderstood, sometimes very deliberately, in the "Western" (essentially Christian) world for the last 1400 years. In doing so, which, at least to me, accounted for some of the most interesting reading in the book, some will no doubt accuse Ernst of acting as an apologist, but the evidence he brings to bear on the issue, in an attempt to set the record straight, is so well presented, both in terms of writing style and in the appropriateness of historical examples etc., that such a line of argumentation is exposed as amateurish and specious. Ernst clearly knows what he's talking about and one certainly gets the sense that he is merely scratching the surface in marshaling evidence to support his various arguments and points. This last issue dove-tails into the only significant critique I have of the book - namely, that I wanted MORE detail, MORE examples etc. As I mentioned, Ernst is a great reservoir of information on Islam and one cannot therefore help but want to hear more from him. However, I certainly understand the need to limit the scope of any one portion of the book, and there is a good deal ahead after these opening issues. The remainder of the book looks very much like a somewhat unconventional, though still very good, introductory text on Islam - with sections on Muhammad, the Qur'an, Sufism, ethics etc.

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