



### **Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader**

Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell (eds.)

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The editors of this volume have selected some of the many writings of the prolific Muslim intellectual Ziauddin Sardar to produce a volume that represents the core of his thought. The book is divided into three equal parts: Islam, postmodernism and other futures. The first part critiques the ways in which Islam is conventionally understood by Muslims in contemporary times and proposes a fresh approach to recapture its authentic spirit. The second part describes and critiques the current postmodern ‘stage’ of Western civilization. The third brings the first two parts together: re-understanding Islam (and other civilizations) will allow Muslims to reclaim the future for themselves from the dominant West, thereby making ‘other’, non-Western futures a possibility. For Sardar true Islam must evolve in dynamic interaction with current circumstances, but according to its own rather than Western principles. He stands between the Islamic fundamentalist and the Western secularist, but has no time for Muslim apologists who seek to westernize Islam.

The book is most worth reading for its first part. This collection of chapters engages with the problems of Islam’s modern evolution away from its true principles and is a rigorous attempt to re-think Islam without papering over the difficulties inherent in such an endeavour. In ‘Permanence and Change’ in Islam, for example, Sardar shows that Islam’s injunctions must be understood with reference to contemporary reality. In ‘The Shari’ah as Problem-Solving Methodology’, he argues against the ossification of the Shari’ah (which he defines as more than ‘Islamic law’). In ‘Islam and Nationalism’, he makes a connection between nationalism’s parochialism and Islamic fundamentalism; he contrasts them both with the universalist impulse in Islam. He argues that Islam was initially a religion infused by a thirst for knowledge and communication and that regaining this connection, through the Islamization of knowledge, will prevent Muslim thought from being further marginalized in the modern world.

What would all this mean in practice? Sardar of course distances himself from all existing ‘Islamic’ regimes such as the Iranian one and from the Islamist fundamentalist movements that aspire to power. For him Islam is a worldview, not an ideological programme. However, when he moves from abstract principles to precise examples of what a correct understanding of Islam would



mean, his arguments lose some of their appeal. For example, he makes a case for the application of Islamic economics to banking and investment. However, far from making ‘an enormous contribution to shaping the economies of such countries as Malaysia, Pakistan and Egypt’ (p. 295), many ‘Islamic’ ventures were rackets that robbed ordinary people of their life savings. In another instance (p. 67), he charges that ‘Westernised Muslim lawyers find the Shari’ah injunction on polygamy embarrassing’, but his view on the matter is left unclear. His view of the *hudud* punishments prescribed by the Shari’ah is similarly vague (see pp. 75–76).

The editors of this volume have done an excellent job in selecting the writings from a vast body of material (which they have helpfully collected in a ‘Working Bibliography’ of Ziauddin Sardar at the end of the book) and in organizing them so that they form a coherent whole. They have also written a clear and informative general introduction to Sardar’s thought. The problem of the book is in Sardar’s own thought, in particular, his representation of the West. As the book progresses, critique degenerates into a shrill tirade. Nothing of or from the West is good. The liberal and tolerant impulse in postmodernism, the dominant mode in the West according to Sardar, is a pretence and postmodernism is a reincarnation of imperialism. This is something Sardar asserts rather than demonstrates.

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