



Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World (Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks)

By Carl W. Ernst

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Avoiding the traps of sensational political exposes and specialized scholarly Orientalism, Carl Ernst introduces readers to the profound spiritual resources of Islam while clarifying diversity and debate within the tradition. 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. He 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. He concludes with an overview of critical debates on important contemporary issues such as gender and veiling, state politics, and science and religion.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ernst, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is not a stranger to Islam-related controversy. His recommendation of Michael Sells's book *Approaching the Qur'an* to the UNC Summer Reading Program for incoming freshmen spurred an international firestorm. *Following Muhammad* itself was rejected by the publisher that had commissioned the manuscript, as some editors there objected to publishing a book that could be construed as supporting terrorism. Despite these obstacles, Ernst brought the book to another press with rewarding results: it is a pleasure to read. Ernst has a multilayered and self-assured understanding of Islam, and his writing exemplifies a fluency in explaining it that is unique to him, even compared to better-known scholars of the religion. Delicate and complex points about Islam as a religion and culture, about Sufism, and even about Osama bin Ladin, flow off the page effortlessly, with only a few spots that are too abstract. Rather than addressing the standard introductory information about Islam, like the Five Pillars, he has organized his book by themes, with chapters on topics such as ethics and spirituality. The book's greatest strength is Ernst's unrelenting but well-reasoned critique of how the West has consistently marginalized Islam and Muslims from the first encounters onward. Ernst is fair, however-while he admonishes the West for indulging in negative and inaccurate stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, he calls upon Muslims to participate fully in the pluralistic society the world has become.

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From [Booklist](#)

Ernst is highly regarded for his books about Sufism (*The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 1997) and his brilliant translations of Sufi texts. But in this compelling, if occasionally disorganized, book, Ernst introduces the larger Islamic world and its history in engaging, thought-provoking prose. The overarching argument here is that the West ought not understand Islam as a monolith, that debate and diversity are inherent in Islam and were encouraged by the Prophet. So while most introductions to Islam give Shi'ism and Sufism short shrift, they are presented here as vital facets of Islamic belief. Although the text skips around historically, readers will come away with a good understanding of the different schools of Islamic thought and practice. Special attention is paid to the hot-button topics: gender and veiling, the relationship between Islam and democracy, and Islamist radicalism, for example. Ernst's obvious passion for Islam comes through quite beautifully here, and the rare mix of clear writing and careful scholarship makes this an important purchase for any Islamic studies collection. *John Green*

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Review

A helpful resource for university religion departments. It is not a straight 'Islam 101' resource, and because of that, it is very refreshing. . . . A very helpful tool as an introduction to a course on Islam and contemporary religion.--*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

Well-written and lucid. . . . The book's narrative flow is generally masterful. Ernst successfully moves from present to past and back again in a manner that is both logical and clear to follow. . . . An elegant and masterful presentation of a religious tradition in an accessible manner, as well as a heartfelt plea for non-Muslims to understand it.--*American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*

"Ernst provides an overview of Sufism, Shi'ism, and Islamic art. Here we really see the richness and diversity of this tradition.--Spirituality and Practice

Ernst introduces the larger Islamic world and its history in engaging, thought-provoking prose. . . . Readers will come away with a good understanding of the different schools of Islamic thought and practice. . . . Ernst's obvious passion for Islam comes through quite beautifully here, and the rare mix of clear writing and careful scholarship makes this an important purchase for any Islamic studies collection.--*Booklist*

An impressive scholarly work.--*The Telegraph-Calcutta*

This timely volume should be recommended enthusiastically to anyone who wants to gain a nuanced and balanced understanding of the contested position of Islam in the modern world. It fully deserves to be recognized as the single best choice for academic courses dealing with Islam and Middle Eastern studies, in both the undergraduate and graduate levels. . . . This is the rare work that only a scholar at the very zenith of his/her field can write, an even more daunting task given all the polemics about Islam today. There is no better, more profound place to begin - or end - a sophisticated discussion about contemporary Islam than Ernst's masterpiece.--*Middle East Journal*

In seeking to restore a sense of proportion and balance to the image of Islam for his Western readers, Ernst gives proper weight to the layers of mystical humanism, philosophical speculation and hermeneutical flexibility that are no less a part of the Islamic tradition than the legacies of conquest and militancy. He also points out that intolerance and bigotry are far from being the exclusive prerogative of the Western media industries.--*Times Literary Supplement*

[A] thoughtful and finely balanced primer on contemporary Islam.--*New York Review of Books*

A pleasure to read. Ernst has a multilayered and self-assured understanding of Islam, and his writing exemplifies a fluency in explaining it that is unique to him. . . . Delicate and complex points about Islam as a religion and culture, about Sufism, and even about Osama bin Laden, flow off the page effortlessly. . . . The book's greatest strength is Ernst's unrelenting but well-reasoned critique of how the West has consistently marginalized Islam and Muslims from the first encounters onward. Ernst is fair, however--while he admonishes the West for indulging in negative and inaccurate stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, he calls upon Muslims to participate fully in the pluralistic society the world has become.--*Publishers Weekly*

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