

Review of "Islam Unknown"

Icarus, 208 minutes, 2010

Elders, Fons

Reviewed by Jack David Eller

**Abstract:** A series of eight half-hour interviews with prominent modernist, liberal, and/or secular Muslim thinkers reveals the fascinating diversity of Islam today—most forms of which, as the title suggests, are unknown to Western and Muslim publics alike.

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks in November 2015, everyone in the West seems to have an opinion about Islam, but few appear to have any actual knowledge. Most basically, the rampant assumption is that Islam is just one thing—a religion of violence, a religion of peace, or what have you—with little or no awareness of the diversity, and indeed the modernity and in some cases even the liberalism, of the religion. These shortcomings and failures of policy and imagination make *Islam Unknown* a particularly timely work.

Originally produced in 2010, the two-disc set features half-hour interviews with eight contemporary figures in Islamic thought and activism by Dutch philosopher Fons Elders. Each interview is a conversation, with Elders allowing the subject to do most of the talking, interspersed with some scenes of the Islamic world. Of the eight interviewees, two are women, both featured on the first disc. For example, Asma Barlas, a Pakistani woman and professor in Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, offers a discussion that is titled "God is Uncreated, God is without Sex and Gender." She shares with all of the scholars in the series in maintaining that Islamic teachings, including the Qur'an itself, are open to multiple readings and interpretations, in this case not all of which are oppressive of women. Both Muslims and Westerners tend to overlook if not deny the diversity of Islam, and Barlas mentions experts like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose film *Submission* embodies the "epistemic privilege" of Europeans over Muslims. Like many advocates of women in Islam, Barlas declines to call herself a feminist. Instead, she aims to assert gender equality and develops a new language of radical sexual equality on the basis of the Qur'an and an anti-patriarchal view of God. Both masculinity and femininity exist within divine reality, and in the Qur'an, differences are seen as positive. The Qur'an and Islam allow that different peoples have different laws and are judged by their own laws—which will be a surprise to both Western Islamophobes and Islamic fundamentalists like ISIS.

Nasr Abu Zayd follows with a conversation titled "Truth with a Capital T the Most Dangerous Concept." Born in Egypt, he witnessed the Qur'an become "more and more politically manipulated" during his lifetime. He was condemned as an apostate by Al-Azhar University, yet he insists that everything in the meaning of Islam began changing in the 1970s. "Religion is what people do with their religion," he reminds us. The "Muslim" identity was "entrapped" by colonialism and by the stereotype of Islam as a backward religion. The past has been idealized, with people believing that if they think and act like the first generations, all will be well. Also, Muslims developed the view that they must fight the West. The West is likewise entrapped in its impression of Islam. On the subject of sharia, the challenge is to historicize the injunctions (which are not law but guidelines and judgments). For believers, the Qur'an is a product of the encounter between God and man (first Muhammad and then the subsequent human community), but he asserts the difference between revelation/the divine and history/human/culture. Treating the Qur'an as text and discourse(s), he says, "We need an open methodology that does not claim that this is the final meaning." "Truth is like the water in the vessel. Water has no shape and has no color, but in every vessel it takes the shape and the color of the vessel."

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, author of an important book called *Islam and the Secular State*, appears in a talk titled "Everything I Do, a Quest for Meaning." He seeks the equality and dignity of all people, regardless of religion, having learned from his teacher, Taha, who was executed for apostasy. The human is the divine as work-in-progress, he argues. Following Taha and Sufism, the present is the only real time, and

religion is about being free from the past and the future. "The divine is in the present." As for the much-discussed and maligned sharia, he posits that it is an organic and evolutionary process; sharia is an entry-point, not the end and whole of religion. Sharia is like the material you use to make clothing for a child—growing with the child over time. A 'secular state' is one that is neutral on the subject of religion, including whether people are religious or irreligious. Indeed, he holds that the Qur'an does not mention the state; it speaks to the individual. A state cannot be 'Islamic,' and "for the state to claim to be religious is a dangerous proposition." He actually claims that Muslims need the state to be secular so that they can be a Muslim. The notion of an Islamic state is *bid'a* or innovation. Turkish secularism in particular should have legitimized the notion of a secular state but instead "simply suppressed the Muslim culture" by taking control of it. He supports politics based on human rights, constitutionalism, and citizenship which "allow us to debate public policy without reference to religion."

The fourth figure, and the only other woman, is Amna Nusayr, whose interview is called "I Became another Woman." The most earnest of the interviewees, she discusses the importance of all prophets from Adam to Muhammad and the changes that she thinks are needed for there to be a more constructive relationship between the West and Islam and the Middle East. But more than anything else, she repeats that she loves people of all countries and cultures. The Qur'an leaves it up to individuals to be Muslim or not, Christian or not, etc. The real problems between Islam and the West are political, not religious. She does indulge in a discussion of Israel, which many viewers will dislike for her criticism of Jews as putting themselves above all other nations as 'the chosen people.' On the subject of Islam, she contends that many of the gender practices in Islam actually come from culture, including pre-Islamic culture. Significantly, she declares that the relationship between Islam and the West is the most important part of the future, but the two can share with each other and change many aspects of memory and history. "We need it."

The second disc opens with the figure whom viewers are most likely to have heard of, if they have heard of any contemporary Islamic thinkers. Reza Aslan is the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War* and more recently of *Zealot*, about the politics of the historical Jesus. In his conversation, 'A Cosmic War is a Religious War,' he begins by distinguishing between orthodoxic (e.g. Catholicism) versus orthopraxic (e.g. Islam) religions. Islamic monotheism is a profoundly and deceptively simple idea, he states, and that very simplicity allows Islam to take many forms and include many peoples and cultures. Noting the different schools of jurisprudence in Islam, he concludes that there is no single thing called 'sharia.' Sharia is mostly a call for identity. But Europeans are also struggling to form identities, often in violent and destructive ways. Islamophobia is and has been central to the European identity project, the Muslim appearing as the quintessential other, replacing the Jew. He also summarizes his position on cosmic war and its difference from holy war. A cosmic war "is a war of the imagination," in which "one's actions are earth are a reflection of actions that are taking place in heaven." Osama bin Laden's campaign was a war of imagination, without any realizable goals; he did not talk about 'victory,' which is more characteristic of American discourse. Behind al-Qaeda, as ISIS, there are real practical grievances, but even practical grievances are only tools to create an identity and a narrative to mobilize people. "The way to deal with a cosmic war is to deal with the grievances," because "you cannot win a cosmic war." Jihadism as a social movement connects local grievances to other remote grievances and global forces.

Anouar Majid, author of *A Call for Heresy: Why Dissent is Vital to Islam and America*, insists in his writings and in his interview that 'We are all Minorities.' "A society without multiple opinions, multiple points of view, multiple beliefs is a society that condemns itself to stagnation," he judges. This leads him to an encouragement of diversity: each society needs to "cultivate its own brand of heretics." European colonialism hardened attitudes in the Muslim world, but the question is "how long are we going to stay in that state." The most potent of his ideas is that the West has long been in conflict with Islam, as far back as the Battle of Tours (732 CE) and the Muslim conquest of Iberia: Europe has come to see Islam as an existential threat, shaping European history. There needs to be solution through a "dialogue of civilizations" between Islam and Christendom. He adds that the reconquest of Spain in the 1400s introduced the blending of race and faith, which is directly connected to colonialism and the Holocaust (purity of race and purity of faith). Most fascinatingly of all, until recently, Judaism was actually closer to Islam than to Christianity: there was more a 'Judeo-Islamic' tradition than a 'Judeo-Christian' one until the twentieth century. "We need

to de-sacralize history to find real-life solutions to the problem of coexistence," he concludes.

Omer Ozsoy's interview, titled 'Also the Qur'an is the Work of Its Time,' will probably be the most difficult for audiences to appreciate, partly because it is conducted in German and partly because he speaks with a theologian's voice. Making the familiar distinction between divine revelation and human language), his position is that it is necessary to read passages of the Qur'an in their context (whether textual or social is not entirely clear). Admittedly, the Qur'an can be unpalatable as a modern text, so we must realize the distance between the text and the reader, placing it in its historical context and what God was trying to realize (but how are humans to know this other than through the text?). He then turns to the veil/headscarf debate, which is not a matter of Qur'anic interpretation but an issue of human rights. He takes the surprising and controversial side that it is a woman's right to *wear the veil* rather than that the veil is a violation of rights. That is, to *forbid* it is a violation of women's rights. He does explain that covering the woman's entire face or body was an Arab tradition, not a Qur'an commandment, and that there are Islamic customs that are not entirely based in the Qur'an.

The final interview stars Mehmet Asutay, whose segment is titled 'Justice—The Essence of Any Moral Economy.' His main thrust is a criticism of the identity construction of nation-state 'imagined communities' that excludes ethnicities, religions, and nations. He despairs that Europe, the cradle of democracy and the face of humanistic Western civilization, has developed a nationalistic and even xenophobic identity and an obsession with 'the public sphere' that tramples differences. 'Tolerance,' as others have noticed, can be an exercise of power by those who are empowered to 'tolerate' others. Ironically, he finds that the West closes off its democracy as it asks other countries to take it as the model of democracy. The conversation then turns to a topic for which he is best known, that is, Islamic banking and his concept of 'an Islamic moral economy.' He encourages economic and financial pluralism along with political pluralism and concludes that across all moral economies, the common core is social justice. Finally, he indicts contemporary capitalism (which only arose after the 1930s) for its divorce of the real economy and the financial system.

*Islam Unknown* might be a bit too intellectual for a general audience, but its message is true and crucially important: there is more than one Islam or kind of Muslim out there, most of which are unknown to those who are quickest to offer an opinion or to act in fear and defensiveness. Even more than its diversity, patient viewers will learn that Muslims can be and are modern, liberal, indeed secular, and that many Muslims see the need to diversify their own religion—which is a lesson that could and should be applied with equal gusto to Christianity and every other religion and ideology.

Level/Use: Suitable for college courses in cultural anthropology, anthropology of religion, anthropology of modernity, and Islamic studies, as well as general audiences.