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Religion, Ideology & Violence

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have been possible without the inclusion of a discussion of medium and presence; and so on with the majority of our chapters.

Perhaps that is where the greatest strength of this volume lies: in its inter-subjectivity and cross-disciplinary overview of materiality. Only when all these terms are brought together and ostensibly separated into their own categorized chapters do we really see how tenuous and porous the lines between these elements, terms and ideas really are. Ultimately, in case there was any lingering doubt at the onset of this review, this volume affirms that material religion isn't a separate sub-study of religious studies any more than religion is entirely separate from anthropology, history, gender studies or the other social sciences. It is indeed refreshing to encounter a volume which bears these considerations in stride.

Alexander Nachaj
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Is Islam an Enemy of the West? Tamara Sonn. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2016. 137 pages. \$15.95CDN (Paperback).

Tamara Sonn is the Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Professor of the History of Islam at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. In her persuasive essay, *Is Islam an Enemy of the West?* (2016), Sonn poses the title question, and seeks to answer it in several ways. By tracing significant events in global history, Sonn examines the multitude of conditions that have contributed to assumptions and realities framing contemporary discourses on Islam. Sonn unpacks the development of Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, discussing their establishment and expansion in relation to the social, economic, and political conditions of different communities. Albeit an ambitious project for such a brief monograph, Sonn breaks down her exploration and argumentation in a fashion that is both thorough and accessible.

Sonn divides her discussion into six sections, with each returning to the original prompt of the essay: is Islam an enemy of the West? In her first chapter, "Islam v. the West?", Sonn presents the key events that facilitated

the ongoing War on Terror. Sonn initially suggests that, if looking exclusively at these events (such as the 9/11 attacks and the establishment of ISIS), the logical answer to the essay's title question is "yes". However, Sonn immediately counters this conclusion by arguing that Islam as put forward by radical groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS is not the Islam of most Muslims. While this conclusion may seem obvious to scholars of Islam and religious studies more broadly, such scholars are likely not the intended audience of Sonn's piece.

Chapter Two, "Jihad: Message, Motivation, and Methods", similarly traces the development of Muslim extremist groups in more detail, discussing their ideals and missions as presented by leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Again, returning to the essay's prompt, Sonn concludes that if these groups do, indeed, represent Islam, then Islam appears to be an enemy of the West. However, Sonn again complicates this conclusion, arguing that "mainstream Muslims" are the group most widely targeted and negatively impacted by Muslim extremists. Indeed, by asserting that *jihadi* extremists are outliers in the Muslim community, Sonn argues that conceptualizing the current conflict between terrorists and the West as a "clash of civilizations" is both homogenizing and inaccurate.

In Chapter Three, "Muslim Opposition to Terror", Sonn examines the de/re-contextualization of Quranic verses and concepts (such as *jihad*, for example) to suit different ideologies and agendas. Sonn thus argues that the Quran is like many other religious texts in this way. There are calls to war and violence that, when situated in their original contexts, correlate with the events or circumstances of that time. However, when placed in the context of modern society, these decrees no longer hold relevance. Indeed, Sonn offers multiple examples of Muslim communities and their leaders denouncing terrorists, arguing that such groups are wrongly interpreting the Quran: a very widely adopted exegetical and argumentative move among Muslim scholars and laypeople alike.

Chapters Four and Five, entitled "Shared Grievances" and "Mainstream Muslim Strategies", focus upon the grievances regarding the West that are shared by extremist groups and the broader Muslim community. Here, Sonn discusses the Palestine-Israel conflict, along with other post-colonial conflicts in countries that have large Muslim populations (such as Somalia and Chechnya). Such conflicts have been cited by figures like bin Laden as proof of the evils of Western society, but are also significant for

Muslims who are not associated with extremist groups. Sonn argues that, despite these “shared grievances”, most Muslims choose to focus on the socioeconomic development in their countries, and in maintaining strong relationships with other nations in the global community— including Western nations. Thus, Sonn seeks to demonstrate that the strategies of extremists are specific to these groups, rather than to Islam as a religion.

This final point is further fleshed out in Sonn’s sixth chapter, “Religion is Not the Root of Conflict”. In this chapter, Sonn suggests that while many contemporary scholars claim that Islam is on a “collision course with the West”, the situation is much more nuanced. The conflicts outlined in this essay have less to do with Islam as a religion, than with the political, social, and economic oppression of Muslim-majority nations throughout history by Western imperialists. These power dynamics have created the conditions for the people of various countries around the world to feel disenfranchised at the hands of Westerners.

It is this conclusion that is perhaps the strongest point of Sonn’s argument. Certainly, Sonn’s endeavour to outline an incredibly complex series of events, conflicts, ideologies, and movements in a way that is comprehensible to the average person is one that may have been impossible to complete without making some problematic assertions. Indeed, Sonn’s continued use of “mainstream Muslims” as a category for discussing Muslims who are not extremists is highly problematic. Ismaili Muslims, for instance, are hardly “mainstream”, and yet they presumably fall under Sonn’s categorization here. However, painting in broad strokes is likely the only way such an overview could have been written. Sonn’s work thus acts as a comprehensive examination of a question that is widely posed. That she can cover such ground in a way that remains clear and insightful makes this text an important read for many. It is increasingly difficult (yet also crucial) to articulate in layman’s terms why Islam, the religion, is not the root of the world’s current conflicts. Sonn’s work here serves as a clear explication of this truth, and should be read carefully and widely.

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