

The Intertwined Conflict: The Difference between Culture and Religion

Najebah Marafi

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This brave book is a passionate expression of moderate Islamic values in the Middle East.

This brave debut publication from Kuwaiti graduate student Najebah Marafi is an apologetic take on Islam in modernity, particularly on its manifestations in the Middle East. Fierce in tone, its goal is to show that popular perceptions of Islam are distorted by a false conflation of religion with its cultural expressions.

Marafi uses verses from the Koran to argue that Muhammad's vision for godly living was much more progressive than the versions of Islam that have been allowed to shape many contemporary Arabic-speaking nations. Cultural imperialism and blind adherence are shown to be culprits of religious distortion. Those interested in honoring the true tradition, she insists, must seek the nuance that lies beyond surface presentations.

Such generous and hopeful interpretations are characteristic of her work, in which Koranic verses demanding equanimity, humility, peace, and goodness are held up as primary directives, in contrast to the more antagonistic verses that are often touted in the media. The station of women and jihad are the first and most prominently dissected subjects, and Marafi seeks to show that Islam offers socially beneficial guidelines for both. Though such sections tend to rely too much on repetition, they also illuminate underemphasized room for women's liberation and self-conscious spiritual strength within Muslim tradition.

After tackling those grand and divisive topics, Marafi winds down to discuss more culturally specific issues, like Internet usage, in latter chapters. Tendencies to digress from the subjects at hand yield interesting, if not always relevant, asides. Those compelled by her revisions stand to also appreciate her understanding of Islam's relation to such features of the modern world. Necessarily, these sections lack the Koranic support of earlier chapters.

Marafi's perspective on Middle Eastern culture is both attuned and self-critical, and she doesn't shy away from tough topics. Still, her apologetic exercises don't always suggest balance. Those who interpret the Koran differently than she does, particularly on more inflammatory topics, are dismissed as "morons" and "idiots" and are charged with poisoning the well for all. Further, her conviction that social maladies cultivated on Islam's behalf can be reasoned away by calling the perpetrators not validly Muslim veers on excessively simplistic.

Contrasts drawn between Islam and other religions practiced today sometimes lack scholastic bases. Marafi explains Bible-thumping Christianity as that which directs fanatics to beat those who wear t-shirts and shorts with the holy book; Jewish women are said to lose ownership over their property after marriage; and both Christianity and Judaism are charged with calling for the death of defectors. Islam is called the "only religion which does not discriminate...on the basis of color, gender, and other nationalities." These claims run the risk of derailing surrounding arguments. Editorial blips, like misspellings, variations in text size, and a repeated paragraph, prove distracting.

While *The Intertwined Conflict* is unlikely to entice the so-called wrong-thinking Muslims it readily condemns, its perspectives should garner sympathy from those otherwise unfamiliar with Islam's diverse expressions. This is a

passionate expression of moderate Islamic values in the Middle East.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May 8, 2014)

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