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General

Ibrahim Warde. *The Price of Fear: Al-Qaeda and the Truth Behind the Financial War on Terror*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2007. pp. 262. Notes. Index. Hb. £18.99. ISBN 9 7818 5043 4245

There are now so many books on Al-Qaeda, it’s refreshing to find one with a specific, fresh angle. In taking a close look at Al-Qaeda’s finances, Ibrahim Warde is covering new ground. And as he points out, it’s an issue about which Western governments tend to make bold, sweeping claims: President Bush, Gordon Brown and others have often compared Al-Qaeda’s financial arrangements to its “life blood”.

In reality, money is the least of Al-Qaeda’s concerns. The attacks on Western targets have been cheap. Warde reckons 9/11 cost under $500,000; the Madrid train bombing under $10,000 and the London underground bombing under $1,000. Furthermore, he argues, the money used to pay for attacks is generally moved through normal, legitimate accounts in well known international banks. Western governments have often coupled the financial war on terror with their efforts to combat money laundering. As Ibrahim Warde points out, however, there is little reason to believe that tackling money laundering will have much impact on militants determined to launch an attack.

Warde is also unimpressed with the media’s treatment of the financial war on terror. *The Price of Fear* proves something celebrities already know: once a story gets into print it will reappear time and time again without anyone bothering to check its accuracy. Government officials and journalists have often repeated the claim, for example, that Osama bin Laden is worth $300 million. Ibrahim Warde has tracked down the source of that figure. It first appeared in a 1996 State Department fact sheet. An analyst had simply estimated the wealth of the Bin Laden Group ($5 billion he thought) and divided it by the estimated number of sons in the family (twenty he reckoned). The analyst then rounded up the resulting figure of $250 million to $300 million. As Warde says, the method didn’t even rise to the level of a “back of the envelope” calculation but has subsequently been repeatedly cited as an established fact.

The main problem with this book is that it tends to wander from the financial war on terror to make more general points about President Bush’s foreign policy. Warde gives a competent rundown of the weaknesses in the official justifications for going to war in Iraq but this is familiar territory. Indeed, many of the criticisms he makes of the Bush administration are well known and his recitation of them can at times seem somewhat leaden.
This book is at its best when it is discussing the topic in the title: the truth behind the financial war on terror.

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Mehran Kamrava (ed.). The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity – A Reader. I. B. Tauris, London, 2006. pp. x + 291. Notes. Index. Pb. £15.99. ISBN 9 7818 4511 2752

Encouraged by recent signs of new thinking by young Muslims such as Irshad Manji (The Trouble with Islam) and Ed Husain (The Islamist), your reviewer was bold enough to tackle something more academic in similar vein. Alas, this collection proved a disappointment. Apart from the editor’s introduction, the other 13 contributions are reprinted from earlier publications dating between 1986 and 2004. They do not make easy reading: what follows represents such nuggets as this reader was able to glean.

Mehran Kamrava (Professor of Political Science at California State University) explains that the ideas of the authors are inspired by reformist interpretations of Islam in the face of those of “self-righteous fundamentalists” whose voices are louder and admit of no debate. Muslim moderates are on the defensive. Those included here are a broad cross-section of the reformist intellectual trend. Unfortunately it lacks the “institutional support” required to gain widespread acceptance.

The editor goes on to draw a distinction between *ijtihad* as seen by the fundamentalists and by the reformists. While for the former “the sacred text remains frozen in time and place, for the latter the gates [of interpretation] remain wide open”. He further distinguishes between conservative intellectuals who advocate Islamising modernity and reformists who call for the modernisation of Islam (although he later claims that the authors in this book maintain that “It is not Islam in itself that needs to be reformed … but rather our understanding and our historical operationalization of it that need changing”). Their discourse involves four broad themes: conviction in Islam as faith and a system of belief; democratic pluralism; Islam’s relations with other great faiths; and coming to grips with the phenomenon of modernity.

Whether all this amounts to an “Islamic reformation” remains to be seen in the light of four fundamental obstacles: the lack of institutional means of getting their message across; an international environment which undermines the message; opposition from the religious establishment; and opposition from the state. Kamrava’s own conclusion is that “Islamic reformation may not be upon us yet. But all indications are that it cannot be too far in coming”. *Inshallah* – but if so its “new voices” will need to be clearer as well as louder.

Would that the remainder of the volume attained even Kamrava’s level of lucidity. Mohammed Arkoun (Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London) examines the forces operating on Islam in the contemporary world, but his philosophical jargon is barely intelligible. Tariq Ramadan (Visiting Fellow at St. Antony’s 2005) discourses on The Way (Al-Sharia) of Islam, giving an overview of some of its core principles which is no less complex but at least has a few comprehensible insights. *Sharia* is a human construction and as such has aspects which may evolve just as human thought
evolves. *Ijtihad* involves adaptation to time and context. Western Muslims are not in exile but at home: they should not only say so but feel so. Muslim scholars prefer to recall the glorious past of Islamic science than the invitation of the religious sources to move it forward.

Fethallah Gulen (a Turkish exile in the USA), Mohamed Talbi (Professor of History at Tunis University), Mobsen Kadivar (Iranian academic), Muhammad Shahrour (Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering at Damascus University) and Nasr Abu Zaid (Egyptian exile in the Netherlands) deal with different aspects of Islam’s relationship to democracy; religious freedom; pluralism; and theory and practice. The main impression given by these discussions is the familiar one that the scriptures can be quoted to suit almost any argument: e.g. “Kill anyone who changes his religion” (attributed to the Prophet himself)/ “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (according to the Qur’an). Lest anyone should think that the “new voices” are sympathetic to the West, Abu Zaid includes a side swipe at the pressure it exerts on the Muslim world to protect its economic and political interests: support of undemocratic and unpopular puppet regimes, portrayals of Islam as inherently violent, and so on.

Leila Ahmed (Egyptian writer and academic, resident in the USA), Amina Wadud (African-American convert to Islam) and Fatima Mernissi (Moroccan academic) have some interesting things to say about women in Islam. Veiling pre-dated it and had more to do with social status than religion. Many of the familiar religious, civil and penal ordinances (including stoning for adultery) originated with the second Caliph, Omar. Male dominance prevailed over the pre-Islamic society in which women were active participants in their community, while the Islamic conquests resulted in assimilation of certain less liberal features of the institution of marriage. The dysfunction between the egalitarian precepts in the Qur’an and the treatment of women in practice is underlined, though Mernissi is optimistic that this will change with advances in education and other social progress.

Chandra Muzaffar (Malaysian Islamic philosopher) discusses the Qur’anic notion of justice. He believes that justice would have triumphed more if politics had the service of humanity as its overriding principle instead of the pursuit of power. This would have been facilitated by following the Qur’an’s message of *tawhid* (“one-ness”) as the most important principle of life. Heady stuff.

The final two chapters return to the theme of Islam’s compatibility with science, freedom and democracy. Hasan Hanafi (Professor of Philosophy at Cairo University) dwells on the difficult concept that Islam does not recognise a separation between “facts” and “values”. Here again the importance of *tawhid* in the sense of a process of the unification of the two is paramount, and is found in the Qur’an but not in the Jewish covenant or Christian monasticism. Abdolkarim Soroush (Iranian academic) concludes the book with a highfalutin treatise on the philosophical compatibility of Islamic rationality with freedom and democracy.

If the reader has persevered thus far he is likely to be left with the impression of a mixed bag, not all of which will persuade even those favourable to moderate Islam, let alone those who adhere to the simpler if pernicious doctrines of the “fundamentalists”. But perhaps your reviewer would be better advised to stick to the likes of Manji and Husain.
The influx into Europe in recent years of large Muslim populations, together with the spread of international terrorism, have focused attention on a number of consequent problems. These have embraced integration, assimilation and multiculturalism. The bottom line has been whether Islam is compatible with European values, in particular democracy and growing secularisation.

In 1994 Olivier Roy proclaimed “The Failure of Political Islam”. His book with that title was reviewed in *Asian Affairs*, October 1996, pp. 332–334. He believed that the reformist tendency in Islamic movements (trying to Islamise society) had predominated over the revolutionary tendency (trying to achieve state power). The present short volume addresses a different, though not unconnected, aspect of the Islamic scene. In a closely-argued, francocentric thesis, the translation of which seems somewhat stilted, he discusses at a rarefied intellectual level a series of questions arising out of the impact of secularisation, defined as “a social phenomenon requiring no political implementation but deriving from religion ceasing to be at the centre of human life”; and *laïcité*, described as “a political choice defining the place of religion” in the state.

For Roy the question of compatibility in turn raises a further one: whether opposition between Islam and the West derives from the latter’s Christianity or its secularisation. While the UK and the USA have approached these problems through multiculturalism, regarding Islam as a distinct culture which need not conflict with the dominant culture, France has gone for assimilation, which overrides cultural backgrounds in favour of the political community. Both approaches are in crisis because the current religious revival involves the loss of cultural identity. *Laïcité* in particular confines specific religions or cultural identities to the private sphere, and the French experience has lessons for relations between Islam and the West generally. In the West Islam is being integrated in a way which does not follow its own traditions but according to the place that each particular society has defined for all religion. Thus when those who in 2004 had taken hostage two French reporters in Iraq demanded abrogation of the French law banning the wearing of veils in school in return for releasing the prisoners, French Muslims rejected the demand and supported the position of the French Government.

The discussion follows a tortuous course to which a brief review can hardly do justice. Roy argues that Muslim intellectuals (exemplified in Tariq Ramadan and others of the “New Voices” – see review above) have enabled Muslims to live in a secularised world while remaining believers. Islam takes many forms, and can cope with secularisation as well as any other faith can. Opponents of this “antidote to the Islamic threat” question this compatibility on the grounds that Islam does not distinguish between religion and politics and that it is also a culture which makes assimilation difficult.

A niggle remains: where does the violent extremist minority fit into this picture? Roy would say that it is not inherent in the Islamic tradition but a reaction to secularisation. However that may be on an intellectual plane, extremism can do – and is doing – a great deal of damage in the “real world”. 

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Strictly speaking, this book lies outside Asian Affairs’ normal time span, for it deals with the Asian world up to the beginning of the European invasion from the 16th century onwards. Yet Gordon’s nicely written account of some of the great travellers of the pre-invasion Asian world is well worth reading both for the stories that it tells and the lightly drawn lessons that it points towards. Gordon’s method is to retell the adventures of a number of travellers, all but one from Asia, who have left written accounts of their adventures, triumphs and disasters. He argues that from 500 AD to 1500 AD – he prefers to use the CE format, however – Asia was far and away the most important part of the world. It had the five largest cities, of which three, Beijing, Delhi and Istanbul, survive. There were many lesser ones, such as Baghdad and Kabul, which still have a resonance today. Gordon notes that while there were great differences in religion and customs between the various parts of Asia, yet there were also common characteristics, and some of these come out in his travellers’ accounts. He begins with the Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, who at the beginning of the seventh century left his monastery on Louyang, and began a journey that would take him to India and back via what we call the Silk Road. Although Xuanzang travelled wholly through a Buddhist world, he encountered others who professed different religions but who generally managed to live in harmony with each other. He also realised that religions come and go; even in areas where Buddhism had once thrived, new thoughts and ideas were gaining ground. The second traveller is Ibn Fadlan, who some 300 years later undertook a major journey at the other end of Asia, from Baghdad to the Volga River, as the emissary of the Caliph to a distant king who sought the Caliph’s support. The mission was a failure, though Ibn Fadlan returned to safety despite many fearsome moments. Next comes Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, a philosopher and physician, whose travels in Persia and further east shows the vast intellectual network that operated in the Muslim world. Religious tolerance is indicated by the tale of Abraham bin Yiju, a 12th century Jewish pepper merchant. The survival of his correspondence in Cairo is a remarkable feat in its own right. Gordon draws out the trade links, the personal ties, and the shared values both personal and in goods, silk especially, that marked this world. The last story, however, marks the beginning of the end. At the beginning of the 16th century, Tomé Pires, a Portuguese apothecary and government official, agreed to lead a diplomatic mission to China. It was a total failure. The Portuguese did not understand the customs of East Asia, those customs that had seen the other travellers prevail often against almost impossible odds. Instead, poor Pires and his companions brought with them the attitudes of the crusades, and an assumption of superiority that went down badly with their hosts. They brought no presents and hosted no banquets. Most of the party were executed, though Pires returned to Portugal. But the pattern was established. Gordon tells the story well, with clear maps and good illustrations. The final lessons are lightly indicated: increasingly, East and West would be in conflict, as assumptions of equality gave way to a sense of superiority.