

Review Article

Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought (2009): A Brief Critical and Comparative Analysis

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Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought [i], a selection of 18 texts – 16 from individual Islamic Intellectuals and two from Islamic Sunni groups, Hamas and the Taliban (all originally published in Arabic, Urdu, Persian, French, German, and English), drawn from the whole Muslim World: from the Arab Middle East to Iran and Africa, and from South Asia to Central Asia – is an outstanding, enlightening, expounding, stupendous, informative and illuminating, rather than exhaustive, extensive, comprehensive, thorough, all-embracing and all-inclusive, anthology of key ideas and prominent thinkers, from the early twentieth century “Islamist” thinkers/intellectuals to the present (some even living), that have created, fashioned, and formed “Islamism” over the past century.

In this anthology, the editors – Roxanne L. Euben (Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Religion at Princeton University) – take “Islamism” (which is not, however, universally

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accepted, and is frequently invoked with caution and caveats, vigilance and warning, and has been described by various names and labels) – to refer to the “contemporary movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community, excavating and interpreting them for application to the present-day social and political world”(p. 4).

Islamism, for them, in this anthology is what has been described in the media and policy circles in numerous other ways, with a number of labels and terms: from “Islamic extremism” to “political Islam”, to “Jihadism”, and “fundamentalism” – the very last being still the most commonly used English term to refer to “religio-political movements, Muslims or otherwise”, although *coined* back in 1920s (see, p.4, n2). Moreover, in the post-9/11 era – in which Islam has been described and frequently used as the ‘violent’ and ‘terrorist’ religion, and as new terms have gained popularity and frequency, prevalence and dominance – “Islamism” has been more closely identified with “terrorism” among others, so much so that the two “terms and the phenomena they name are often depicted as synonymous” (p.3).

Methodology

Consisting of 5 parts (I-V), and divided into 19 chapters (including 46-page introduction by the editors) and biographical introductions/notes preceding each “text”, this selection includes the selected texts – excerpts and extracts and selected portions from their books, interviews, etc – from 16 individual Islamists (both Sunni and Shi`i: twelve from the Arab world, including two females as well, two from Iran, and two from the Indian subcontinent) and two militant Sunni groups: Hamas and the Taliban. Covering the topics on a variety and diversity, array and multiplicity of positions – ranging from the relationship between Islam and politics/state, to Jihad and violence, and from Islam and democracy to gender, and women`s rights/position – this selection brings into sharp relief the ‘commonalities’ in Islamist arguments about politics, gender, violence, Jihad, democracy, and much more.

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Organized and arranged thematically and subject-wise, and not in chronological order, the “Islamists” – both activists and intellectuals, incorporating those trained as “Ulema” as well as “new religious intellectuals” – included in this selection are: Hasan al-Banna (1903-1949), Sayyid Abu’l ‘Ala Mawdudi (1903-1999), Sayyid Abu’l Hasan ‘Ali Nadwi (1914-1999), and Sayyid Qutb (1903-1966) (under Part I: *Islamism: An Emergent Worldview*); Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini(1902-1989), Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr(1934-1980), Hasan al-Turabi (b. 1932), and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926) (under Part II: *Remaking the Islamic State*); Murtaza Mutahhari (1920-1979), Zaynab al-Ghazali (1917-2005), and Nadia Yassine (b. 1958) (under Part III: *Islamism and Gender*); Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj (1954-1982), ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman (b. 1938), and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (1935-2010) (under Part IV: *Violence, Action, and Jihad*); Usama bin Laden (1957-2011), and Muhammad ‘Ata al-Sayyid (1968-2001) (under Part V: *Globalizing Jihad*). In addition, “ Hamas” (estb. 1987) and “The Taliban” (estb. 1994) are also included in part IV.

Each “text” is preceded by an “introduction” of the author, ranging from 5-11 pages each (but of 5 and 6 pages in the majority cases), representing and depicting, portraying and illustrating – as becomes apparent from the same – each writer (‘*alim*/intellectual/thinker) as “Islamist” to fit as per the subject/text that follows. For example, in Part I, “*Islamism: An Emergent Worldview*”, the four intellectuals and religious scholars discussed are portrayed as: Al-Banna is introduced as the “father of contemporary Islamism, and with good reason” (p. 49), while as Mawlana Mawdudi is represented not only as one of the “prolific Islamist writers” who is “responsible” for Islamism in Indian subcontinent, but also as one who has “influenced”, more than anybody else in the 20th century especially, the “political vocabulary of Sunni Islam” (p. 79). Similarly, while as Nadwi is portrayed as “an influential contributor to the Islamist discourses from 1950s”, whose thinking “blurs the boundaries between Islamists and ‘ulama” (p.107), Qutb is regarded as “one of the most influential architects of contemporary Islamist political thought” (p.129). It is necessary to point out here that in post-9/11 era, Qutb has been labeled and branded as “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror” (by Paul Berman, a journalist) [ii]

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and “godfather of Muslim extremist movements around the globe”^[iii] (by Prof John L. Esposito, one of the most accepted, respected and recognized authorities on Islam), and “the father of modern fundamentalism” (by Robert Irwin, Middle East editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*)^[iv] among others.

In the same way, in the succeeding parts, other intellectuals/thinkers and ulama too are portrayed almost in the same way. In Part II, “*Remaking the Islamic State*” – consisting of the writings/texts of Ayatollah Khomeini, Baqir al-Sadr, Hasan al-Turabi, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi – Khomeini is illustrated as one who “epitomizes Islamism”, on second place after Osama bin Laden, “more vividly for Western observers” (p.155); al-Sadr, whose legacy extends well beyond the “intricacies of Shi`i politics in contemporary Iraq”, (p.185) as the “most prominent symbols of Shi`i resistance to Saddam Hossein regime.” (p. 181); al-Turabi as the “influential Sudanese Islamist” (p.207); while as al-Qaradawi is regarded as the “most prominent scholar and preacher in Sunni Islam” of 21st century (p.224), who is also an important figure who represents a new brand in Islamism – the “moderate Islamism” (p. 303).

In Part III, “*Islamism and Gender*” – consisting of the writings of Murtaza Mutahhari, Zaynab al-Ghazali, and Nadia Yassine – the authors are depicted as “Islamists” in this way: Mutahhari is “widely organized as one of the most important intellectuals” associated with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (p.249); al-Ghazali is characterized as the “unsung mother” of contemporary Islamist movements, whose life and works have received “less scholarly and popular attention”, a “pioneering da`iya dedicated to bringing Muslims to Islam through education, exhortation, and example.” (p.275); while as Nadia Yassine – the “unofficial spokeswoman for the most popular Islamist group in Morocco, Jama‘at al-‘Adl wa’l Ihsan” (the Justice and Spiritual Association, or JSA) as well as the official leader of JSA’s women division (p.302) – who has arguably joined, along with al-Qaradawi, to the brand of “moderate Islamism”, exemplifies all the “promise, pragmatism, and complexity [that] the label [moderate Islamism] suggests.” (p.302). Playing a “crucial role” in bringing “the JSA’s blend of Islamism,

Sufism, and nonviolent populism to a new generation of Moroccans”, she at once “articulates and embodies the uneasy union of Islamism and feminism, challenging a host of assumptions about each along the way.” (p.302)

Part IV, “*Violence, Action, and Jihad*” – consists of the writings, Charter, and Interviews of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, ‘ Hamas’, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, and ‘The Taliban’ respectively; and Part V, “*Globalizing Jihad*”, consists of the *fatwa* (Declaration of war against America) of Usama bin Laden and Muhammad ‘Ata al-Sayyid’s “Final Instructions”. The main argument put forward in these two sections is that “Jihad is arguably Islamists’ most consistently explicit concern.” (p.40). Here too, individuals as well as groups are portrayed as “Islamists” or more aptly – for these sections – “Jihadists”.

Faraj has been described as “twenty-seven year old electrical engineer from Cairo”, who was executed six months later, along with four other members of *Jama’at al-Jihad*, for the murder of Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat, on October 6, 1981. (p.321); ‘Abd al-Rahman, a blind Egyptian Shaykh, who was the “charismatic maestro” responsible for the “urban war” or of 1993 bombings in USA (p.344); ‘ Hamas’ – the abbreviated name of *Harakat al- Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement), established in 1987, meaning in Arabic “fervor” or “zeal” – has been described as a “terrorist organization and a network of social welfare, an Islamic liberation theology” (p.356); while as Fadlallah is described as “one of Lebanon’s best known Islamists and its most influential religious scholars” (p.387) and ‘The Taliban’ – who emerged in 1996 in Afghanistan’s scene – reveal, both before and after 9/11, “a very different facet of Islamism” than those represented by other Muslim activists, groups, intellectuals, including those presented here in this volume (p.414). In the same vein, bin Laden is described not only as the “most famous Islamist of the twenty-first century” but as the “primary founder and financier of al-Qa’ida”, who is, for some, “a warrior-priest”, and to others a “terrorist” who has twisted Islam for “discriminate violence” (p.425), while as ‘Ata al-Sayyid is described as

“one of the five hijackers on American Airlines flight 11, the airplane that tore into the North Tower of World Trade Centre” – what is commonly known as the 9/11(p.460).

Themes and Subject-Matter of the Book

In **Part I**, the discussion revolves around the following themes: al-Banna`a “Toward the Light” (pp. 56-78) is a “message” that he sent to various “kings, princes, and rulers of various countries of the Islamic world, as well as to a greater number of civic and religious leaders in those countries” (p.56). Mawdudi`s “The Islamic Law” (pp. 86-106) – part of his *Islamic Law and Constitution* – includes, for the most part, law and life, objectives, characteristics, and legal aspects of the *Shari`ah*. Nadwis, “Muslim Decadence and Revival” (pp.112-128) discusses, among others, Jihad and Ijtihad, evils of monarchy, the crusades, impact of Tatar invasion, Ottomans: their advent and fall, etc. Qutb`s two essays – selection from his “Signposts along the Road (pp.136-44) (Arabic: *Ma`alim fi`l Tariq*) [v] and another from 7th volume of his *tafsir*: “In the Shade of the Qur`an” (Arabic: *Fi Zilal al-Qur`an*) [vi] (pp. 145-52) comprise the 5th chapter of Part I.

In the **Part II**, Khomeini`s “Islamic Government” (pp.163-80), some selected portions of his *Islam and Revolution*[vii] are presented; al-Sadr`s “The General Framework of the Islamic Economy” (pp.186-206) – composed of three main components: (i) The principle of multifaceted ownership; (ii) The principle of economic freedom within a defined limit; and (iii) The principle of social justice (p.186) – are discussed; Turabi`s “The Islamic State” (213-23) discusses, in his own views, the “universal characteristics of an Islamic state” derived from the “teachings of Qur`an as embodied in the political practice of the Prophet Muhammad and constitute an eternal model that Muslims are bound to adopt as a perfect standard for all times” (p.213). This part finally includes Qaradawi`s “Islam and Democracy” (pp. 230-45) – basically a detailed and in depth answer to a question posed by an Algerian Muslim; the crux of the question is: Is it true that Islam is opposed to democracy and that democracy is a form of unbelief or something

reprehensible? Qaradawi's opinion and his overall stand about relation between Islam and democracy becomes clear from these statements:

“I am one of those who call for democracy [not simply as a slogan but] because it is feasible and disciplined means to an honorable life, one in which we can call others to God and to Islam according to our beliefs and without being thrown into dungeons or executed. This democracy would also be the means to a free and honorable life for our people, in which they enjoy the right to choose their rulers, to hold them accountable, and to change them if they go astray without having to resort to revolutions or assassins.” (p.244)

In **Part III**, the chapters illuminate Islamist gender norms by revealing the character and content of Islamist concerns about the place and purity of Muslim women, for “gender is frequently an implicit preoccupation among Islamists” (p.40). Consisting of three chapters, this part discusses “The Human Status of Woman in the Qur’an” (pp. 254-74) by Mutahhari – a full-fledged and detailed answer to these questions: what kind of entity does Islam envisage woman? Does it consider her the equal of man in terms of dignity and respect accorded to her, or is she thought of as belonging to an inferior species? (p.254). It is followed by Zaynab al-Ghazali's two “texts”: one is “excerpts from the 1981 interview”, entitled “An Islamist Activist” (pp.283-87), and second is chapter 2 of her memoir, *Ayam min Hayati* [^{viii}] entitled as “From Days of my Life, chapter 2” (pp.188-301), which reveals her connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, Nadia Yaasine's “Modernity, Muslim Women, and Politics in the Mediterranean” (pp. 311-17) puts forth two main points, viz: (i) Justice and Spiritual Association (JSA), contrary to conventional stereotypes, advocates both “non violence and the sine qua non participation of women as the best means of reproducing the model of social justice promoted by the original Islam” (p.314); and (by way of conclusion regarding the Scarf) (ii) The Islamic Scarf, “a significant symbol of the transformation of a movement”, is a testimony of faith, as well as expresses threefold break:

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“When a woman wears the Islamic scarf, she reclaims her spirituality, reconquers the public sphere (because the Islamic scarf is a projection of the private sphere within that public space), and finally makes a political declaration of dissidence against the established order, be it national or international.” (pp. 316-7)

Part IV and **V**, both collectively, put forth the argument that “Jihad is arguably Islamists’ most consistently explicit concern” (p.40). Part IV begins with Faraj’s “The Neglected Duty” (327-43), presenting his views on “Jihad for God’s cause” which, for Faraj, has been “neglected by the ‘ulama of this age” (p. 327). Next are presented views of ‘Abd al-Rahman on what he calls as “The Present rulers and Islam: Are they Muslims or not?” (pp. 350-55). The next chapter, “Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine” (pp. 364-86) – as the title aptly reveals – presents the charter of Hamas (dated 1 Muharram AH 1409/ 18 August AD 1988), describing its ideological origin, structure and formation, universality, motto, goals, strategy, initiatives, means, etc. (among others). Next presented are Fadlallah’s two interviews, dated 1995 and 2001, namely “Islamic Unity and Political Change” (pp.394-402) and “September 11th, Terrorism, Islam, and the Intifada” (pp.403-08). Finally (in this part) are presented two selections from “The Taliban”, namely: “A New Layeha for the Mujahidin” (pp.415-17), a collection of 30 rules – and every “mujahid must abide” by these rules (p. 415) which ends with these words (although without mentioning the name): “Signed by the highest leader of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan” (p.417); and secondly, presents interview of Mullah Sabir, entitled as “An Interview with a Taliban Commander (2006)” (pp.418-21). The final part (Part V) consists of two “texts”: one is Bin Laden’s “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” (pp.436-59) – in which he urges Muslims of the world, in the following words, to take part in fighting against America and Israel:

“your brothers in Palestine and in the Land of the Two Holy Places are calling for your help, asking you to take part in fighting against your enemy and their enemy: the Americans and Israelis. They are asking you to do whatever you can, with one’s own

means and ability, to expel the enemy, humiliated and defeated, out of the sanctuaries of Islam” (p.458).

Finally, Muhammad ‘Ata al-Sayyid (pp.460-65) `s “Final Instructions” (pp.466-71) are presented, the language of which, as noted by the editors, in the light of observations of various scholars, is “often brutally crass or simple-mindedly therapeutic”; “unyieldingly rigid” in its “conceptual framework” (pp. 463-4). Nevertheless, the editors note (in “Biographical Introduction of ‘Ata al-Sayyid) “the document provides a window onto a worldview in which Islam is not simply a repository for reflexive rage or rhetorical camouflage for what are essentially socio economic grievances, but rather a particular lens on religion, history, geopolitics, and power.” (p. 464).

The chapters in this volume suggest that what makes Islamist politics distinctive (if not *sui generis*) is the claim to recuperate and recover an “authentic Islam” comprised of self-evident truths purged, cleansed and eliminated, of alien and corrupting influences, along with an insistence, perseverance and persistence, on remaking the foundations of the state in its image (see, p.27). Although the editors do not wish to suggest that “Islamists are necessarily ‘intellectuals’”, but at the same time, this anthology puts forth the argument that just as it is not easy to differentiate Ulama from Islamists or Islamists from modernists; it is sometimes difficult to clearly distinguish between Islamists and *salafists* as well (see pp.18 and 19).

A Comparison and Brief Critical Analysis

Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought, it is necessary to point out, is not the first book/work on “Islamism”, but there have been books on the same subject – whether they mention or refer the term “Islamism” in their titles or not – earlier as well. Reference (and mention) may be made of the following two books in particular: (i) 2nd edition of John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito`s *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* [ix], and (ii) John Calvert`s *Islamism: A Documentary and Reference Guide*. [x] *Islam in Transition*, a collection of

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original writings by seminal thinkers of the modern Muslim world from Sayyid Qutb, al-Afghani, to Hamas and Khomeini, presents a wide range of viewpoints from a cross-section of Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders (including almost all those mentioned in book under review) – from secular to devout, traditionalist to reformist, and moderate to extremist – addressing crucial and critical key issues including Islam and nationalism, socialism, the secular state, economics, modernization, democracy, women, jihad, violence, terrorism, suicide bombing, globalization, and civilizational dialogue. In the *Islamism*, Calvert, in Nine chapters, has organized the 41, mostly excerpted, documents by subjects such as “Islamist Movements and Thinkers”; “Islamism, Democracy, and the Limits of Freedom”; “Women and Family in Islamist Discourses”; “Global Jihad”, etc., and here too, are included all those mentioned in book under review. Aiming to enhance, improve and increase, our understanding of the Islamist phenomenon, the documents in this work, written by Islamists themselves, shed light on the origins, goals, and practices of Islamic-focused groups and movements throughout the Muslim world. Each document is identified and analyzed as to its significance, but very precisely and briefly. But what distinguishes, separates, and makes the work under review most distinctive, unique, and characteristic is its “unique” feature, and that most unique feature of this anthology, in comparison to other anthologies/ works on “Islamism” (for example, the above two) is that in this book, Euben and Zaman provide the reader with “biographical introductions”/ “biographical notes” that precede each selection. Doing more than just introducing the authors, they explore the background, networks, and issue that link each writer with broad patterns of Islamist political thought. It is this unique and additional feature that distinguishes and differentiates *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* and makes it a ‘better guide’, a must read for everyone interested in contemporary Islamist through in particular and in listening to the new and old voices, although “Islamist” and “conservative”. The 46-page “Introduction” (pp.1-46) – a book in itself on the various facets of “Islamism” – and the significant, comprehensive and well-informed introductions to each chapter are worthy of, and call for, a cautious reading and understanding, for this anthology situates the selected intellectuals, or by that way “Islamists” and their thought within the distinctive Islamic intellectual tradition in all its complexity. There is no other

anthology that better demonstrates the multiplicity of Islamist thought, the intricacy of its intellectual and political contexts, or the variety and diversity of ways in which it relates to other intellectual and religious trends in the contemporary Muslim world. The book also includes rich “Glossary”, and a well-to-do “Bibliography” and “Index” as well. But, at the same time, there are some shortcomings in this anthology as well.

Some Shortcomings and Weaknesses

Although a good and rich anthology of Islamist readings, there are some shortcomings in this anthology as well. For example, the editors provide, in the “biographical introductions” of the author`s, some highlights about the “texts”, that follow, as well (e.g., as in chapters 8, 10, 15, and 19) but do not do so for majority of them. Had they provided same, at least briefly, for every text, it would have done justice, as far as understanding and reading of each author is concerned; and instead of (*mis*) understanding the concerned/particular author, the reader could have understood them properly and in right direction. Being a humble student of Islamic Studies (and especially of Contemporary Islamic Political Thought), I believe, as far as academic approach is concerned, that by “ignoring” (and paying less attention to) such an important fact has deprived, denied, and underprivileged the editors from big a task, and also by this they are responsible for “misunderstanding” and “misreading” the authors (intellectuals and scholars) included in this anthology, by the readers (especially by general/average readers, and by those who know little about them).

One more important point that needs to be highlighted is that some of the “Islamists” included here have been included and labeled as “liberal” by others: case in point is Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who is also included in Charles Kurzman`s 1998 anthology, *Liberal Islam*,^[xi] under the section “Freedom of Thought”. No doubt, Qaradawi is regarded/labeled as the “moderate Islamist”, but the overall impression of the book is that all are “Islamists”, by that way

“Jihadists”. Same is the case with Nadwi, for no other work has introduced him as an “Islamist” thus far.

Moreover, while discussing Qutb (who is regarded as the main source of “radicalism”, “Jihadism”, and main inspiration behind al-Qaeda and other “terrorist” or “militant” groups), at the same time, the editors argue that although he was not a “Sufi”, but he “echoes of a mystic’s direct encounter with the fountainhead of truth and knowledge are hard to miss in Qutb’s writings, especially in his commentary of the Qur’an [*Fi Zilal al-Qur’an/ In the Shade of the Qur’an*]” (p.24); and (for this remark) they quote the following opening lines of his Preface of the commentary: “Life in the shade of the Qur’an is a blessing ... unknown to anyone who hasn’t *tasted* it.” (p. 24; *Italics* in original, by the editors)

Finally, it seems confusing and perplexing to see essays and excerpts on “women’s rights”, “status of women” etc. – i.e., “gender” issues –under “Islamism” label; for all those scholars/writers – whether early modernists or present-day (living) intellectuals, both male and female – who discuss issues/themes related to women, especially regarding their “status”, “role”, and “rights”, etc. are labeled and termed as “feminist” scholars, and as such this discourse is termed as “Feminism” – whether in East or in the West – with added prefixes like “Islamic”, “Western” etc. So here too, one may possibly say, the editors create confusions in readers mind.

Conclusions

Besides these small number of shortcomings, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* is a must read for all those interested in reading and understanding (in general) various facets/areas of modern Islamic political thought, Political Islam, and particularly in “Islamism” and Islamists discourses of a variety and multiplicity of voices – both Sunni and Shi`i, male and female, activists and intellectuals, belonging to Middle East, Iran, Africa, South and Central Asia – with a range of positions on the relationship between Islam, Jihad, and violence to Islam, politics/state and democracy, to gender and women`s rights/position.

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ⁱⁱ Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror”, *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003 <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

ⁱⁱⁱ John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: oxford University Press, 2002), p. 56

^{iv} Robert Irwin, “Is this the man who inspired Bin Laden?”, *The Guardian*, Thursday 1 November 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism3>

^v Sayyid Qutb, *Ma’alim fi’l Tariq* (Cairo: Dar El-Shorouk, 1997); English translation of pp. 3-10 (selected in this book) by Zaman (the co-editor) and Samia Adnan

^{vi} Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, English translation of *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* by Adil Salahi and Ashur Shams, 12 vols. (Leicester: Islamic Foundation: 1999-2004), vol. 7: 2003

^{vii} Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981)

^{viii} Zaynab al-Ghazali, *Ayam min Hayati* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1978)

^{ix} John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

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[^{xi}] Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)