Academics Discuss Problems to Study Islam

Interpreting Islam edited by Hastings Donnan. Pub: Sage Publications, London, 2002. Pp: 196. Pbk: £18.95.

By Laila Juma

This small volume, fewer than 200 pages, is timely, coming soon after the September 11 attacks, which have brought Islam to the forefront of many minds in the West. Unlike many books rushed into the bookstores during the last few months, this is not an attempt to explain Islam to the uninformed (often by the uninformed); instead it is a collection of essays by Western academics, representing a range of disciplinary approaches, that are intended to demonstrate the ways in which academics and other 'experts' study Islam. Hastings Donnan, professor of anthropology at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, opens his introduction by pointing out that "Islam is known in a bewildering diversity of ways in an increasingly interconnected world," and that this can result in confusion among both academics and other people. He characterises the object of the book thus: "its implicit argument, throughout, is that patterns can be observed in the bewildering and seemingly anarchic diversity of disciplinary approaches to Islam, and that we, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, might learn much by reflecting on them."

As with any edited volume, the papers in this book take up this challenge in a number of ways. The framework provided by Edward Said's landmark, Orientalism, inevitably underpins any enterprise of this kind, and the first paper of the volume, by Bryan S. Turner, is a brief introduction to the Orientalism thesis and subsequent debates about it. Two other papers examine the ways in which Islam has been approached by social scientists in their disciplines; considering that much of the most anti-Muslim invective of recent months has come from academic 'experts' on Islam, it is useful to have some critical analysis of the discourses from which such comments emerge. Perhaps the most interesting paper in the volume is the one by Beverley Milton-Edwards: it looks directly and critically at the ways that Western academics treat political Islam. Charles Lindholm takes a similar approach to anthropological studies of Islam, with — naturally enough — a more personal and experiential perspective.

At the moment it is political Islam, and perceptions and understandings of it, that are first and foremost in people's minds, and this subject is covered in this book by Milton-Edwards, also a political scientist at Queen's University, who has written on the Islamic movement in Palestine. Milton-Edwards' paper, 'Researching the radical: the quest for a new perspective', begins by asking why studies of political Islam are dominated by so-called 'radical Islam', a formulation

which presupposes a negative view of Islam as dominated by violence, terrorism and "attempts to bring about the revolutionary overthrow of modern secular government." She links this to a number of factors, none of them new. These include Said's argument that the West's perception of Islam is shaped by Islam's traditional role as the negative 'Other' in the West's self-definition. She accepts, to a point, the position taken Fred Halliday, among others, that some Muslims contribute to this perception by their positions and statements. But she also highlights the fact that, for whatever reason, it is Western popular culture more than anything else — books, films, television, photographs and newspaper reports — that leads to a perception of "the world of war (dar al-harb) and the world of peace (dar al-Islam), only the West's world of war in Islam and its world of peace revolves around some global order dominated by democratic and benign western powers."

This leads her to the main object of her paper: "to question the role of those who research and write specifically about radical Islam, in both its abstract and concrete forms, in either perpetuating or advancing such perspectives or attempting a more careful reading of that which is radical Islam." She considers that Western scholarship about political Islam is dominated by two camps, each of which can be described by a term of derision used for it by its critics; these are the neo-orientalists and the apologists. The neo-orientalist camp consists of those who, in her view, have failed to take on board Said's analysis, and continue to see Islam through the same traditionally jaundiced eyes, on the assumption that the West represents all that is modern, progressive and good in the world, and Islam the precise opposite.

The "patriarch of conservative Orientalism" is Bernard Lewis; others she cites as neo-orientalists include Emmanuel Sivan, Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer. It is the work of such academics, she considers, that provides academic and intellectual legitimacy for the popular image of Islam. She also points out that the increasingly influential field of 'terrorism studies' consists almost entirely of such neo-orientalists, with popular prejudice, political interest and academic bias feeding off each other to promote the vision of 'holy terror'.

Against these have emerged academics with a more nuanced, balanced view of political Islam, who have adopted Saidian perspectives to critique the orientalists' approach. There are also some, many of them Arab or Muslim, who have attempted to explain political Islamic movements in less essentialist and judgemental terms. All these are dismissed as "apologist" by the orientalists; their judgementalism is implicit in the term: few of them show any genuine understanding of, let alone sympathy for, the Islamic movement perspective. Such scholars include as varied a group as Milton-Edwards herself (who was once interrogated by the FBI

because of her supposed Islamist sympathies), John Esposito, James Piscatori, Aziz al-Azmeh and Nazih Ayubi.

Milton-Edwards concludes by looking at the area of Islamic political studies from a woman's perspective, pointing out that one result of the orientalists' domination of the field is that it remains almost entirely a male preserve: "when radical Islam is represented in a way that portrays it as violent, engulfed in webs of terror and characterised by hostile misogyny, sometimes located in geographically tough terrain, in war zones or remote regions, the work of researching the subject becomes 'men's work'." Most of the few women in the field, she considers, either accept the male-imposed framework without seeking to challenge it, or bring to their studies a "feminist (secular or Muslim) perspective."

She believes, however, that there is a new approach emerging, "a new way of researching and writing radical Islam that is gendered, and predicated on a new discourse," which is being driven by female scholars from the Middle East. Their approach, she says, is to "highlight the diversity and debates within radical Islam and... not let their gender get in the way of the researched subject... They avoid the essentializing of radical Islam that is so prevalent elsewhere in the field. While researching the radical, they privilege the subaltern voice, a voice that stands in stark contrast to the stereotype so often reproduced by reductive analysis." How substantial this new approach will prove to be — Milton-Edwards is able to offer few examples of it, although she would clearly like to be considered part of it herself — remains to be seen; but if such an approach should emerge, among either male or female academics, it can only improve understanding of Islam in the West.

Lindholm's paper apart — which considers reasons why anthropology has come relatively late to the study of Islam — the other particularly interesting paper in this volume is by Susan L. Douglass and Ross E. Dunn, 'Interpreting Islam in American Schools'. Douglass and Dunn examine the ways in which Islam is presented to young Americans in school, and reflect critically on eleven typical texts. They show how Islam is variously presented as antiquarian or exotic, and how the relationship of Islam and Islamic civilization and history to that of the rest of the world is routinely distorted. In three of the eleven texts, for example, "the Ottoman empire is sent into decline before students read about the early modern Iberian expansion or the development of bureaucratic states and religious wars in sixteenth-century Europe," thus increasing the sense of distance and alienation between the contemporary world and Islamic civilization. They also propose a number of ways in which American Muslims can themselves improve the understanding of their faith and culture by other Americans, many of whom are probably far more open to education in this area than their government and elites would like.

Other papers in the volume include discussions of ‘Islam in the media’ by Malise Ruthven, Islamic civilization and the sea by Xavier de Planhol, organized charity in the Muslim world by Jonathan Benthall, and music in the Muslim world by Martin Stokes.

At this time, however, it is inevitable that this volume will be noted most keenly for Beverley Milton-Edwards’ paper, explaining as it does why so much comment on Islam, for example in the aftermath of September 11, is as damaging and ill-informed as it is. Expecting the neo-orientalists to take the slightest bit of notice of Milton-Edwards’ arguments is pointless, of course, considering their total failure to take on board any of the discussions inspired by Edward Said’s pioneering work, and the blind prejudice that colours their approach. However, the fact that there are some academics willing to stand up to them and their bullying dominance of the field is encouraging. For that, at least, Milton-Edwards deserves recognition, and this volume deserves to be noted by all those interested in Western academic readings of political Islam.