

Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections

Edited by Karim H. Karim and Mahmoud Eid
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A Book Review by

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Today the world seems to be divided between Western and Muslim societies. Both parties are in an increasing conflict, with Muslims opposing Western intervention in Muslim countries and the West opposing religious extremism by Muslims. Both societies are excluding each other and forming an “Other”. At a time when this division is so visible, the book *Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections* makes a timely academic contribution by offering a holistic synopsis of the historical engagement between Muslim and Western societies. Edited by Karim H. Karim and Mahmoud Eid, *Engaging the Other* includes chapters written by well-known scholars in the fields of architecture, conflict resolution, civil society, education, immigrant integration, inter-cultural relations, media, and political participation. Each chapter examines productive engagement between Western and Muslim societies in history and contemporary times.

The editors draw on Edward Said’s thesis of the clash of ignorance as critique of Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clash of civilizations. They argue that the reason for the conflict that exists today between both societies is not due to differences in their civilizations, but due to the lack of knowledge on both sides about their historical engagement and collaborations. *Engaging the Other* brilliantly discusses the historical journey of interactions between Muslims and Western society, a topic that is rarely discussed and reviewed. The editors have carefully selected perspectives from scholars in the aforementioned fields to demonstrate the possibilities of productive interaction between Western and Muslim societies. The editors suggest that although Western and Muslim societies have different values, their civilizations overlap. There are differences between both societies but any similarities are mostly ignored. Throughout its chapters, this edited collection highlights these similarities and mutual values between Muslim and Western societies.

Organized into eleven chapters, *Engaging the Other* takes its readers through the commonalities between Western and Muslim societies in different areas. The book prefaces with a comprehensive exploration of Muslim influence in Spain in different areas, from architecture to names and vocabulary. For example, Arabic was used to manifest royal dignity and power, with the Christian ruler of Toledo (Spain) studying Arabic and Jewish dignitaries using the language in synagogues. Muslims, Christians, and Jews had collaborative relations during the medieval

period. Nine centuries ago when Jews were facing ethnic cleansing in Spain and were taken as slaves by Christians, they found freedom and safety among Muslims. Similarly, during the rule of Alfonso VI in Toledo, Muslims had freedom of worship and right to own property. The integration process of Muslims into Western societies has proven more challenging in today's climate.

In chapter four of *Engaging the Other*, Shiraz Thobani sheds light on the integration of Muslims into the contemporary European education system. Development of an education system that is able to form cohesion and affiliate with collective humanity is a need of the contemporary globalized world. Europe, with its liberal education system, has periodically altered the system to be able to function well with constant political, economic, and social changes occurring in the continent. Muslims, however, still face challenges integrating fully into the European liberal education system. With the increasing growth of the Muslim immigrant population in Europe, European states developed strategies to better integrate young Muslims into their society by introducing Islam in order to address their presence in school curriculum and adjusting school regulations to be able to accommodate the needs of Muslims. Representations of Muslims and Islam remain a challenge in the European educational system. According to Thobani, the medieval imagination of Islam and Muslims as "Other" is preventing European educational systems, based on liberal principles, to fully integrate Muslims into Western society. The author argues that liberal education in Western societies is caught in between two notions: 1) overlooking historical and cultural differences between Western and Muslim societies and 2) emphasizing conflicting differences inscribed in history. Therefore, a sophisticated cultural literacy is required to increase interactions between societies.

Interestingly, *Engaging the Other* also discusses the inner clash of civilization within Muslim societies. Steven Kull, in chapter seven, discusses the topic and provides data from polls and surveys conducted in different Islamic countries. Muslims experience an inner clash of civilization. They sometimes cannot decide between choosing to engage with the broader world or protecting their traditional Islamic culture. The data from polls show that the majority of Muslim populations in different countries support democracy and universal human rights, as well as reject any foreign influence on Islamic culture. It is mostly assumed that Muslims do not support a democratic system of governance while the poll results paint a different picture. The majority of people in Muslim countries do, in fact, support democracy. Although there is an attraction to Western culture, Muslims do not support the spread of Western culture in their society. Muslims cannot fully accept Western culture, which makes communication between both societies challenging.

Policies regarding immigration, security, and refugees in Western society can be perceived as being discriminatory with respect to Muslims. Since 9/11, policy changes, such as airport security screening, are tougher on those deemed Muslim in their appearance. The book argues that in order to have Muslims engaged in and integrated into Western society, it is important to have an understanding of the cultures of Muslims and Islamic beliefs. Western society should develop stronger policies to better integrate Muslims. For example, multiculturalism helps to reduce discrimination and increase acceptance of differences among members in a society. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge commonalities between both sides and their productive engagement in the past to reduce conflict between both societies.

Civil society is mostly perceived as a Western concept, but Muslims have also had associations, within or out of government structures, to provide support and assistance to their communities. *Engaging the Other* discusses this existence of civil society in Muslim

communities and demonstrates possibilities of collaboration between Muslim and Western civil societies to support the well-being of their respective societies. Muslims in Western societies have significant participation in voluntary associations; likewise, Western society is also open to Islamic institutions such as Islamic banks and schools providing Islamic education. There is collaboration between a number of Muslim and non-Muslim organizations which have formed alliances on different matters such as issues of civil rights and freedom of speech.

Engaging the Other also covers other topics such as bridging the gap between civilizations by using the approach of *Ijtihad* to redefine the hermeneutics in Islamic texts. The book also covers the role of media in depicting Muslims in Western societies and an alternative media discourse on Muslims, two medieval Muslim and Christian thinkers' similar perspectives debate as an effective pedagogic tool to discover truth, and Muslims' political participation in Europe and the United States. Although the strength of the book lies in this multidisciplinary approach for examining these issues, it leaves room for a more balanced treatment of Western and Muslim perspectives by including a variety of Western scholarships and also including Christian and Jewish perspectives on this history of engagement between both societies. Nevertheless, this is a challenge for any edited volume—to preserve a balance between breadth and scope.

In conclusion, *Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections* makes a valuable contribution to the discourse of the history of Western-Muslim intersections. The history of collaboration and support that existed between both sides is often ignored today, so this edited volume is an opportune reminder and document of that unspoken history of cooperation. In doing so, the book leaves the readers with the message that if these two cultures and societies have lived together in peace and harmony for millennia and supporting each other in different arenas, then it is possible that they can revive the co-existence and partnership at this contemporary time, too.

About the Reviewer

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