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BOOK REVIEW

Ivan Strenski (2022). Muslims, Islams and Occidental Anxieties: Conversations about Islamophobia. Ethics International Press Ltd.

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Ivan Strenski, Distinguished Emeritus Professor, University of California, Riverside (USA) has organized his recent book *Muslims, Islams and Occidental Anxieties: Conversations about Islamophobia*, in the form of a dialogue between two imaginary people. One of them is Yannick, a recently retired lycée professor living in Meudon-Bellevue, France. The other is Malou, a French-born retired lycée professor of economics in Brussels. Strenski characterizes Yannick as a cosmopolitan person cherishing fidelity to the traditions of Renaissance Christian humanism and interested in a comparative study of religions. Unlike Yannick, Malou "counts herself a faithful Roman Catholic, enthusiastic Francophone nationalist and moderately conservative in her politics" (p. ii). Certainly, the mindset and background of the disputants forms a context for their attitude towards Islam.

The imaginary conversation seeks to engage the readers into the presumptions, complexities, and concerns associated with Islamophobia in the USA, European Union, and France, in particular, where Islamophobia is much more acute than in any EU member state. France has been the most recent site for ISIS murders, such as those of 17 Charlie Hebdo journalists, 86 Riviera vacationers in the 2016 Nice truck attack, and 90 concert-goers in the Bataclan music hall incident.

However, the book is not an introductory survey on Islam across the globe, although containing numerous facts and reflections upon the history and present status of various Islamic countries. As Strenski notes, the book is written for common readers and students, rather than for Islamicists or other sorts of professional specialists. At the same time, the level of expertise demonstrated

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by both disputants is much higher than that of the average Western citizen. In order to understand the widespread anxieties about Islam and to guarantee authenticity, Strenski bases the disputants' arguments on materials on Islam collected from the press, various expert commentaries, Islamic scholars, etc.

The main point of the conversation in first chapters is *essentialism*—namely, an essential set of Muslim fundamental beliefs and practices that have always been found in Islam and among Muslims. According to common fears (shared by Malou), Islam is "patriarchal, misogynist, warlike, violence-prone, intolerant of other religions, given to barbaric practices like honor-killing and cliterodectomy and so on" (p. 13). Moreover, Islam is not just a system of beliefs—it is implemented by Muslims into everyday practice. In turn, Yannick calls into question such essentializing generalizations, due to their tendency to eliminate the complexity and diversity of Islam communities, to make simplifying generalizations about complex things, and to pretend to know the fundamental nature of Muslims. However, Yannick insists that his personal experience of communicating with Muslim friends and students in several Muslim countries where he travelled has taught him "to be careful about making hard and fast judgments about people and the ways we think they live—especially religious people" (p. 8). In reality, he continues, there is no uniformity for 1.5 billion of the world's Muslims, as well as for the two billion of Christians living worldwide. In Christianity, Protestants and Catholics in the West, Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia, St. Thomas Christians of Kerala (India), Bulgarian, Georgian, Serbian, Greek, Russian, Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, among others, the Armenian Apostolic Church, etc.,—all believe to have captured essential Christianity. In the same vein, the Salafis and especially Saudi Wahhabis have dominant ideas about the essence of sexes, good "society", and so on. Anyway, they "do not have an objective monopoly on anything that could pass as the one, true and good—essential—Islam. Their saying so, doesn't make it so, either" (p. 23).

Yannick concludes that it is also hard to speak of some essential or archetypal Muslim—either good or bad—because, in people's real lives, their religion beliefs differ, perhaps radically, from those proclaimed in books and scriptures. Moreover, religions, like other actors in human history, are equally open to criticism despite being commonly thought of as necessarily good things. It is better "to be more modest about thinking that we can capture the unchanging kernel of Islam's true identity. The reason we cannot, is because religions are *works-in-progress*. Because they are *historical* entities, we cannot absolutely know Islam *invariably* and *constantly really* is" (p. 15).

In the next part of the book, the issue of Islam in the context of politics, religion, and civil society is discussed. Strenski, through Yannick, tries to overcome labeling differences between Islam and the West as good versus bad. In comparing Western and Muslim values, he refers to the concept of anthropologist Talal Asad who opposes Western individualism and the Muslim preference of a life defined by a stronger communal good, or, in other words, the ideal of the "self-owning" individual versus the self as belonging to another. According to Asad, "for Muslims, the self has value because it belongs proximately to the *ummah* and ultimately to Allah" (p. 46). Reflecting on the understanding of equality and liberty in the Western world and

Islam, Strenski notes that the Muslim commitment to equality of all male believers is fundamental to Islam where "race, age, wealth or poverty, national origins mean relatively less than they do in many other social arrangements" (p. 92). Equality comes with the powerful reality of "belonging to a community that loves and supports you—the ummah. Muslims see causing alienation from one's relationships the most grievous moral and religious offense. One expects to have one's liberty lived out within a set of rules that apply to all—equally" (p. 97). Conversely, westerners are supposed to be autonomous, free-standing individuals, suspicious about groups and mass discipline. And they pay a great cultural price in terms of the epidemics of loneliness and alienation for their preference for individual freedom over communal responsibility. Thus, Strenski concludes, even though Islam and the West differ with respect to communal versus individual values, these differences need not lead to a hostile opposition of good and evil. Instead, these differences introduce diversity into the world of goods. According to this logic, Islam is seen as a locus of goods that offers a world of alternate goods to the individual liberty: "Because we hold to the truth of the individual as self-owning, doesn't mean that the Muslim truth of the individual as belonging-to-another is false" (p. 45).

An interesting supplement to the discussion on the compatibility of Western and Muslim values is the reference to Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss Muslim theologian and Oxford professor, the author of *To Be a European Muslim* (2013). Ramadan argues that "being a Muslim is not the same as 'dressing up Muslim,' so to speak" (p. 119); in other words, Muslims can be culturally European, while being faithful Muslims at the same time. Moreover, for Ramadan, Islam can contribute constructively to the moral betterment of the Christian West presenting another kind of "good" that Europeans might come to respect. Beneficial Muslim moral influences imply that "our selfish, acquisitive, consumer capitalist society could use an injection of those Muslim values of modesty, self-restraint, social justice or serving the poor!" (p. 129).

A significant part of the book is devoted to the *Islam and Women* issue. Yannick and Malou elaborate on the question of sexual equality versus complementarity, the meaning of "covering" or veiling, the practice of FGM (female genital mutilation or clitoridectomy) in different Muslim countries, and the way in which honor-killing may be or may be not sanctioned by Islam. Here again, Yannick warns about the discrepancy of essentialism in a sense that there could be no single explanation for all these topics due to the variety of real cases in the Muslim world both domestically and in diaspora. Both disputants agree that Islam presents a rather different approach from the liberal West to such matters as sex/gender relations, the nature of marriage and family and, therefore, some Muslim values might be incompatible with the essential Western ones. The question consists in whether the approaches could be reconciled. In any case, as Yannick argues, in actual practice, even in an egalitarian society, males and females do not live as equals, and "we in the egalitarian West can benefit from the insights of Muslim cultures about the 'good' of complementarity" (p. 203). Not to say that women are not always treated as equals in the West, and there is a lot of hypocrisy among westerners on sexual equality: "Male chauvinism is as much a Muslim illness as a Western one" (p. 178).

In their conversation, Yannick and Malou have discussed the sharpest problems of the perception of Islam in the Western world. However, the overall purpose of the book seems to go beyond this particular subject. In the *Foreword,* Ivan Strenski (on his own behalf) expresses his main concern for the possibility of tolerating contradictory opinions, when the opposing sides are convinced of their own truth. Surely, this applies not only to the possibility of a mutual understanding between Islam and Western cultures. Strenski strives to demonstrate not just a "tolerant" dialogue, which is built around a common search and discovery of a single truth. His concept is a "pluralist" dialogue, resting on the co-existence of plentiful and diverse truths: "Pluralism means that rather than one option excluding the other, both may sometimes be true. When they [disputants—E. S.] cannot resolve differences, they note their differences and move on. They agree to disagree and draw the conclusions appropriate to each incident of disagreement" (p. xvii). At present, such a dialogue seems to be acquiring a greater significance in terms of ensuring a peaceful future for the humankind.