

Joonas Maristo & Andrei Sergejeff (eds), *Aikamme monta islamia*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2015. ISBN 978-952-495-371-9. 332 pp.

Reviewed by Risto Marjomaa (University of Helsinki)

Reviewing books compiled from articles is always a tricky task. Instead of a monograph with a single author and purpose, compilations have a number of writers with their separate viewpoints and agendas. Fortunately, the editors of *Aikamme monta islamia* have done their best in trying to come up with a common theme to connect the fifteen articles in the book together. As they note in the prologue, and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila elaborates in the first article that covers the multiple facets of Islam, it is not really helpful to treat a world religion as a single eschatological and social blueprint for all believers to copy, but rather as a general guideline that needs to be fitted into local conditions to take root. The articles that follow provide fascinating examples of how Islam, like any other world religion or ideology, has been forced to adjust itself to local social, political, economic and environmental conditions to survive. Accommodation has been necessary ever since the birth of the religion and it is thus an exercise in futility to argue over the “right” and “wrong” way of Islam. At least from a social point of view, all are equally right and no mortal can claim differently with certainty.

The book contains articles from across the wide expanse of the Muslim world, from Indonesia to Morocco and Ghana to Finland, with even an excursion across the Atlantic to the United States (Ilkka Lindstedt). Of the large continents, only Latin America is left out. Articles vary greatly in their viewpoint and subject matter, but this only underlines how accommodating, occasionally even contradictory, Muslim religion has been in adjusting to prevailing local conditions. A small Muslim minority in China (tackled by Helena Hallenberg) faces a completely different set of challenges and expectations than Muslims living in Indonesia, with the world’s largest Muslim population (Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn), or Muslim communities in the hinterlands of Ghana, struggling against marginalization in a predominantly Christian state (Holger Weiss), or in the tiny Tatar community that has existed for over a century in secular Finland (Antero Leitzinger). This multifaceted nature of a world religion has, somewhat paradoxically, been brought to light well in *Aikamme monta islamia* by the very fact that its articles lack other common nominators than Islam itself.

Perhaps the best examples of the syncretistic aspects of Muslim religion are provided in the two articles on India. During the past millennia or more, Muslim trading communities in Kerala (Tapio Tamminen) have adopted hierarchical influences from Hindu castes and followed the local matrilineal family pattern, both of these traits being viewed as fundamentally un-Islamic among the Muslim majority at large. Further north, a medieval Sufi sanctuary in Delhi (Mikko Viitamäki) continues to attract non-Muslims among its pilgrims, a phenomena incomprehensible to mainline Muslim brethren, and indeed also to most non-Muslims.

On the other hand, in its present form *Aikamme monta islamia* may, however unwittingly, also allow for an interpretation that draws opposite conclusions than what the editors and Hämeen-Anttila's introductory article intended. During the time of colonial rule, many Western commentators on Islam thought that they detected a fundamental split between Muslim core areas in the Middle East and the fringes of the Islamic world, where the new religion had penetrated local cultures less thoroughly. The Islam of the Arab conquerors was regarded as a haughty, violent form of religion prone to fanaticism, while "Islam noir", as it was called with reference to Sub-Saharan Africa, reflected a more benign and effeminate form of a syncretic religion. Fitting neatly with the racial (and chauvinistic) prejudices of the time, this interpretation saw the "Arab race" as aggressive and fanatical, while the conquered "races" were malleable and servile, conveniently justifying the replacement of Arab rule with that of the Western colonial powers.

No such racial bias can be found in the articles of *Aikamme monta islamia*, which steadfastly seeks to break down Western prejudices and portray the various forms of Muslim life as socially defined with wide local variations. The devil lies in the details, though, and in this case the composition of the articles taken together. Those concerning the central Arab-Muslim world tend to reflect current social and political tensions at the expense of cultural or artistic values. There is an article on the Taliban network waging war in Afghanistan in the name of their traditional interpretation of Islam (Andrei Sergejeff), another one concerning the rise of political (and often violent) Shiite movements in Iran and Iraq (Hannu Juusola), a description of the Palestinian political and military organization Hamas (Minna Saarnivaara), and an analysis of the rise of Islamist parties in modern Turkey (Lauri Tainio), together with an article on the roots of the Turkish form of Islamist policies during the late Ottoman empire (Joonas Maristo). Even the articles on the urban poor in Morocco (Marko Juntunen) and public life in the Islamic state of Iran (Elisa Rekola) deal with predominantly political and social issues in a volatile context.

By itself, concentration on the issues that currently so trouble this region is only to be expected. The Middle East is facing turbulent times, and although there is only a partial connection between this and religion (unlike often commonly assumed in the West), it is understandable that the writers have turned their attention to the forms of political Islam, leaving other aspects of religion mainly to the articles concerning the fringes of the Muslim world. The unfortunate side effect of such geographical division of themes is that, despite their and the editor's best efforts, *Aikamme monta islamia* does not wholly escape that threatening sound of distant hooves and the glitter of sabers, which so often are still attached to Islam, a religion with no more violent past or world vision than its ideological rivals. Social and cultural organizations like the Sufi brotherhoods are mentioned only in the context of the fringe societies, and Islamic artistic, educational or humanitarian aspects are left without recognition. It is not to deny credit to any of the current writers, or their important subject matter, to note that one chapter on the softer aspects of Middle East Islam would have not gone amiss.

Individually, all the fifteen articles included in *Aikamme monta islamia* are intriguing examples of the multifaceted world of Islam, and there is little reason to raise any one of them above the others. Save perhaps for Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, whose opening text intends to create a framework to tie the themes of the book together, all the other writers concentrate on their particular topic to the extent that they are able to give a rich and relatively comprehensive account within the strict space available to each article. This causes the book to be a delightfully varied reading, which offers insights on topics that would otherwise easily have been swamped by attempts to give a more comprehensive picture of the world of Islam.