

PREFACE

This book is not about Islam. That is, it is not about the Five Pillars of Islam, or its doctrines, or its rituals, or Islamic fundamentalists, or Islam's attitudes towards women. These one can freely read about in books that fill bookshops shelves or textbooks that are required reading for those studying Islam. This is not yet another such book about Islam.

Yet, this book *is* about Islam. It is a journey into Islam—into the heart of Islam, into the essence of a world religion. It is a journey by means of dialogue. That journey and that dialogue begin with questions and end with even more questions. It is not definitive about Islam, nor is it prescriptive. It does not seek to judge Islam, nor explain it. Rather, it explores Islam—from the inside and the outside.

This book explores Islam from the outside, by a Christian linked to the academy. It does not seek to compare two traditions, Christianity and Islam, searching for similarities and/or differences. It is not a lexicon or a dictionary, intended to reveal doctrines, creeds or even strengths or weaknesses in the two. Rather, from an outside perspective, it asks questions—and at times tough questions—not to undermine, provoke or incite Islam. It does this to *challenge* Islam, but with the best of intentions—to mine the depths of a 1500-year tradition that impacts the lives of billions of people around the world and that includes within its ranks some of the world's best and brightest theologians, philosophers, poets and writers, past and present. A voice from the outside, perhaps representative of numerous voices worldwide but especially from the Western world, seeks to understand Islam in a new way, for Islam is now a fact

of the Western world. The approach taken in this book—an approach of understanding—tries to create a respectful path, for those from different religious, secular and cultural traditions, to find new ways to live together in harmony and peace.

This book explores Islam from the inside, by committed Muslims: a group of younger and older scholars linked to the academy. It includes insights and perceptions from seasoned academics with expertise in areas such as Qur'an Studies, Religious Studies, Women's Studies and Cultural Studies. It includes intuitions and queries from graduate students, research assistants and religious instructors early into their academic careers. Rare were readily prescribed answers given to questions posed. Rather, time was taken to carefully consider, think and reflect on responses, for the questions frequently took group members into areas previously unexplored. In turn, group members uncovered a dynamic Islam; one quite capable of enlivening them, meeting new challenges of the present, countering the harshest of criticisms and breathing new life into teachings that at times are considered static, definitive and prescriptive.

This book explores teachings and rituals of Islam, not to describe them but to reflect on the meaning behind them. It explores questions that might have given rise to them and reflects on new questions that may result from them, so greater understandings are achieved. It seeks to generate new insight into a rich tradition so it does not ossify with the onslaught of secularism.

This book is about Islam in Turkey: about religion in a modern, democratic and secular state. Islam has many faces and presents itself in many forms. Some clash with Western values and lifestyles, causing grief and consternation for both insiders and outsiders. This book looks at Islam from the perspective of a modern, democratic and secular state, and its challenge to Muslims: their thoughts, beliefs and values. In much of Western secular society, religion has been marginalized, its influence waning in social and cultural mores. Turkey is increasingly modern, constitutionally democratic and guardedly secular, yet it is also culturally and traditionally overwhelmingly Islamic. This book looks at Islam from the perspective of those who embrace freedoms brought by a modern, democratic and secular society, yet strive to live out and give expression to their Islamic beliefs and values in light of those freedoms. It is about uncovering the spirit revealed in an ancient text and discovering how to apply that spirit in a modern context, recognizing full well that penetrating questions confront not only an ancient text but also a modern context.

This book is about a framework that assists in raising the questions while at the same time discovering new ones. The framework serves as a tool, a heuristic device, a means not only to ask probing questions to stimulate new thoughts and ideas about Islam, but also to ask the same probing questions of the secular believer and the non-Muslim religious devotee, for all are people of faith, all have faith of some kind and in something.

This book is about big questions. It is about ultimate or existential questions, such as the meaning or purpose of life, discerning right from wrong, our obligations and responsibilities, a higher power, force or being, or about life after this life. It is about questions concerning the stories that influence us, the metanarratives that embrace our thinking and being, the teachings that guide and direction to our lives, the symbols and rituals that define us, and the emotional experiences that captivate us. It is about ontological questions regarding the nature of the human, about our physical and metaphysical natures. It is about epistemological questions that challenge our knowledge, the extent of our knowledge and the sources of our knowledge. Lastly, it is about responses to universal beliefs and values that we embrace, which become expressed in particular ways in particular situations and contexts, questions regarding the dignity of the human, the sacredness of life, diversity and equality, and concern for the environment.

This book is about worldviews that take shape from such questions. It is about the visions of life and ways of life that vary in scope and latitude, in breadth and depth, as they are shaped by responses to such questions. It is about questions put forth by different worldviews (religious and secular), each posed from the constraints of their own perspectives, strengths and limitations.

But mostly, this book is about *an* Islamic worldview. It is not about *the* Islamic worldview, if such indeed exists anywhere. It does not pretend to speak *for* Islam, only *about* Islam, and then only from a particular perspective in time and place. It may not sit well with those seeking definitive answers, or those troubled by uncertainties, fearful of change or uncomfortable with ambiguities. It may not sit well with those frightened by the probing questions of various academic disciplines. But for those seeking to embrace or understand a dynamic Islam that may guide and direct new thoughts and ideas as the crosswinds of change blow consistent and strong across a constantly changing secular landscape, this Islamic worldview might breathe new life into old familiar teachings and practices. If so, then this book is for you.

This book had its genesis at a chance breakfast encounter at a conference in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in late July of 2010. Two strangers—one a Canadian (John Valk) and one a visitor to Canada (Mualla Selçuk)—took a risk that sharing a morning meal together might be more welcoming and rewarding than eating in solitude. That summer morning, in a small cafeteria at St. Paul's University and with few others present, initial icebreakers led to warm and engaging conversations. Before the conference concluded, some strategizing had begun to see what might unfold when people from different nations, language backgrounds, religious beliefs and cultural traditions dare to venture into some uncharted territory, exploring some big questions of a religious, spiritual and existential nature, with a willingness, initially cautiously exercised, to be open and even vulnerable in probing some deep-seated beliefs and values. So began a journey that soon developed into one of deep respect, friendship and collaboration, demonstrating yet again that when trust is established between people of different beliefs and traditions, the dialogue can be rich, deep, mutually beneficial and heart-warming. This book is the culmination of that wonderful journey.

This book arises out of material gathered from five workshops conducted over a span of four years and held at Ankara University in its Faculty of Divinity. Each workshop lasted three to four days, with participants numbering between seven and seventeen. The workshops included younger and older scholars—full professors, assistant professors, research assistants, religious instructors and graduate students—with expertise in areas such as Qur'an Studies, Religious Studies, Women's Studies, Worldview Studies and Cultural Studies.

In each workshop, a particular worldview framework served to guide the discussions. It was set in a particular context of a number of different worldview traditions from which questions were posed to members of the group. Group members joined in an intense discussion with each other regarding the questions posed, raising further questions, testing deeply held assumptions, probing Qur'anic texts, confronting traditional understanding, discerning between textual mandates and cultural dictates, and more. Notes were taken that recorded and encapsulated these passionate discussions. The discussion notes were later expanded and translated into English, and they serve as the basis of this book. First drafts of chapters were circulated to all group members for further input and then refined and polished by the three authors of this book.

This book contains insights from a group of academics younger and older in Turkey bent on giving new expression to an age-old religious tradition, a tradition often perceived as clashing with the spirit of modernity. They explored questions that arose for them, in their various capacities and roles, as they sought to give meaning to a faith constantly under pressure to confine itself to private spaces. This book garners insights from multiple perspectives that include the theological, philosophical, historical, cultural, sociological and more. It dares to ask hard, critical questions, venturing into the uncharted and difficult territory. It incorporates insights from experts long into the journey and intuitions from those beginning the journey. It arises from innumerable conversations, workshops, discussions and dialogues. It seeks not to judge or prescribe, but to explore and probe. Its goal is to enliven, raise new questions and gain new understandings into a religious tradition whose influence will be felt globally in a heightened manner in the twenty-first century.

This book regards the Qur'an as a sacred text, as the revealed Word of God for Muslims. As such, for them, it has ultimate authority. But its insights are unveiled best by approaches from different angles, from multiple perspectives. The Qur'an was revealed in a particular time and place. How to interpret its message is a complicated business, over which much ink has been spilled. But the historical-critical method has been invaluable in discerning messages that are directed to the original hearers of a specific time and place and those that are intended for general audiences of every time and place. It recognizes that language used in a particular time and place needs interpretation, for language and its meanings evolve over time and context. Understanding the message of the Qur'an is also assisted by insights gained from new knowledges that unfold with the dynamic unfolding of time and history, and from civilizations and peoples in different cultural, demographic, political and social contexts.

This book is intended for a wide audience. It is intended for those inside Islam who seek a deeper understanding of their faith that goes beyond prescriptive teachings, ritual practices and scriptural quotes. It is intended for those outside Islam who seek to understand Islam in a way that goes beyond the fundamentalist portrayals offered up by the media or that which has been hijacked by Islamic fundamentalists themselves. It is intended for students of Islam, whether inside or outside the faith who seek a broader and more dynamic approach to understanding an ancient tradition which continues to instil deep faith in countless millions. It is intended for scholars who recognize that secularism has not delivered on

many of its promissory notes, and that the world's religious traditions have new opportunity to invigorate the hearts and minds of adherents. It is intended for a general but inquisitive audience dissatisfied with superficial renderings of Islam and who seek nothing more than to develop a better understanding of the neighbours with whom they work, share neighbourhoods and yearn to shape a common future.

Fredericton, Canada
June 2017

John Valk

An Islamic Worldview from Turkey

Religion in a Modern, Secular and Democratic State

Valk, J.; Albayrak, H.; Selçuk, M.

2017, XXIX, 186 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-66750-8