

Ali, Souad T. *A Religion, Not a State: 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2009, 163 pp., 978 0 87480 951 0, \$25.

Many Muslims have asserted over the generations that Islam is a '*din wa dawla*', meaning a religion and state intertwined. The Egyptian intellectual 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1887-1966) challenged this claim when, in 1925, he published an Arabic treatise titled *al-Islam wa-Usul al-Hukm (Islam and the Foundations of Rule)*. His central argument was that Islam is a religion, not a state; a message, not a government'. Some of 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's colleagues among the '*ulama* (Muslim religious scholars) found his treatise so outrageous that they secured his expulsion from the supreme council of Al-Azhar, which was then, and still remains, one of the most important institutions of Sunni Muslim scholarship in the world. In this concise and accessible book, Souad T. Ali sets out to defend 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq from his detractors and to emphasize the continuing relevance of his thought to Muslims today.

'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq wrote his treatise only one year after the government of the new Republic of Turkey declared the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate. The Ottoman sultanate's claims to the caliphate had always been shaky. Nevertheless, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and amid the pressures of European imperialism, many Muslims from North Africa to India had come to take comfort in the idea. Historically and theoretically, the caliph was the appointed leader who, as successor (*khalifa*) to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE), maintained justice and social order while defending the collective interests of the Muslim community (*umma*).

When 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's treatise came off the press, forty Muslim delegates from fourteen different countries were gathering in Cairo for a conference to discuss the possibility of identifying a new caliph in the wake of the Turkish ban. The ruler of Egypt, Fu'ad I (titled sultan from 1917 to 1922 and king from 1922 to 1936), reportedly entertained the idea of his own candidacy for this position -- a notion that now seems preposterous, given the reputation that Fu'ad and his successors developed for political scheming and questionable ethics. Aware of these circumstances, 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq used the treatise as an opportunity to dismiss not only the need for a caliph, but also the need for a king—thereby adding King Fu'ad to his list of enemies. Ultimately the Cairo Caliphate Conference accomplished nothing, while the dream of reviving the caliphate faded. Readers interested in further details about this conference as it relates to 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, the Egyptian monarchy, and the development of Egyptian nationalism may wish to consult the account in Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski's *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (Oxford University Press, 1986, especially pp. 60-70).

While Souad T. Ali is aware of this historical context as it pertained to Egypt in the 1920s, she is chiefly interested in understanding 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's relevance for Muslims in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her book is a study of modern and contemporary Islamic thought and not of political history. She seeks to defend 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq against his critics who discredited him by attributing his rejection of the caliphate to a triple process of westernization, secularization, and deculturation. Thus she argues that while he was aware of Western intellectual trends (having studied briefly at Oxford) he rooted his claims about Islam and government in a long, deep scholarly tradition of

scholarship on the Quran, the *hadith* (traditions about the Prophet Muhammad and his companions), and Islamic jurisprudence more broadly. The author maintains, in short, that 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's thought was both authentic and modern; that it emerged from a vibrant culture of *ijtihad* ('independent inquiry') and *tajdid* ('renewal'); and that it belongs to the intellectual lineage of the still highly respected Egyptian Muslim thinker, Muhammad Abduh. 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq represents what the author calls a 'third category' among modern Muslim intellectuals: neither conservative Islamist nor liberal secularist, he advanced 'secularization within an Islamic idiom' (p. 7).

Why does the author find 'Ali Abd al-Raziq to be so inspiring? She explains his importance to contemporary debates on Islam and politics in the concluding chapter: 'Advocates for separation of state and religion continue to be tarred with the brush of Westernization, a charge which unfairly attaches a stigma to the argument before it can be fairly engaged and understood.... To this end, the work of 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq offers an invaluable contribution to contemporary liberal discourse, honoring yet breathing fresh life into the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Egyptian scholar and reformer Muhammad 'Abduh' (p. 123).

There are three broad groups of Muslims today who may feel invigorated by Ali Abd al-Raziq's treatise: first, Muslims who live in predominantly non-Muslim states for whom Islamic government is not pertinent to daily existence; second, Muslim feminists and other activists who seek to affirm their Muslim values while nevertheless challenging social and political conventions, including legal restrictions based on traditional interpretations of Islamic law; and third, disillusioned Muslims who observe oppressive Islamic regimes or movements (e.g., in Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan) while hoping for something better. In a

pluralistic, rapidly changing world where migration is increasingly common and where approximately one-third of all Muslims now live as religious minorities, many committed Muslims may find 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's insistence on the non-essentialism of Islamic government to be both refreshing and reassuring.

Souad T. Ali's *A Religion, Not a State: 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism* offers a lively analysis of one of the boldest Muslim thinkers of the early twentieth century. Her book will appeal to readers who are interested in the intellectual antecedents of contemporary liberal Muslim thought.

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