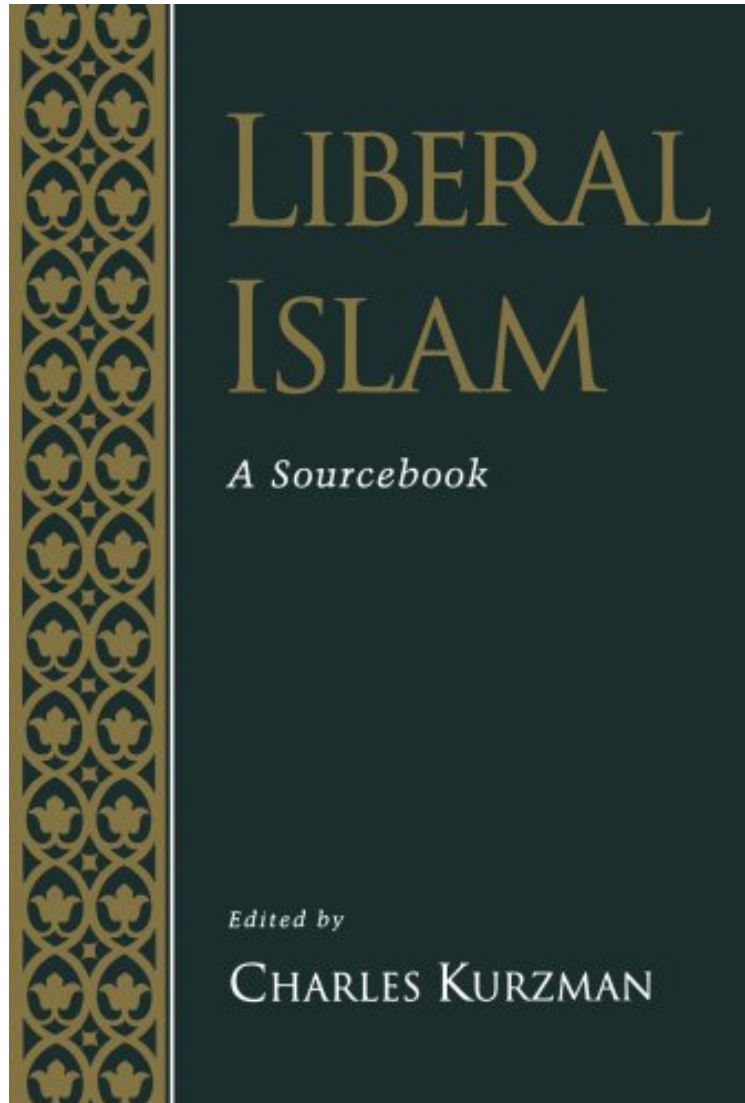


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Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook

From Charles Kurzman

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helpful. Islam and modernity

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"Liberal Islam" is a collection of writings by real or perceived Muslim reformers who argue that Islam is compatible with democracy, secularism, universal human rights and women's emancipation. With the exception of Benazir Bhutto, none of the authors in the collection are widely known in the Western world. The book contains writings from almost all parts of the Muslim world: North Africa, West Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. There is also a contribution from Bosnia, and a text written by an African-American Muslim. The most interesting texts are the ones dealing with women's rights, especially Muslim feminist Fatima Mernissi's attempt to deconstruct a popular anti-woman hadith (saying of the Prophet). Benazir Bhutto's arguments for a progressive interpretation of Islam are also interesting. Bhutto, of course, was the prime minister of Pakistan for two terms, becoming the first woman elected to lead a Muslim state. (Unless you count Aisha!) Another interesting contribution is Ali Bulac's analysis of the Medina Constitution. A problem with "Liberal Islam" is that the editor's introductions to each text are very short. This makes the volume difficult to use for people unacquainted with the various authors. For instance, one wishes to learn more about the writer from Bosnia, who quotes both Plato and Ren Guenon, and sometimes sounds like Leo Strauss! One also wonders how much influence the respective writers really have. For instance, how important is "the reform group" in the Philippines? For rather obvious reasons, I prefer modernist or secularist Islam to traditionalist or fundamentalist versions. Hopefully, ideas such as the ones in this book will one day become the dominant interpretation of this particular world religion!

"Liberal Islam" is not a contradiction in terms; it is a thriving tradition and undergoing a revival within the last generation. This anthology presents the work of 32 Muslims who share parallel concerns with Western liberalism. Although the West has largely ignored the liberal tradition within Islam, many of these authors are well-known in their own countries as advocates of democracy and tolerance. Among these are: Abdulkarim Soroush, a leading oppositional figure in Iran; Nurcholish Madjid, a prominent Indonesian intellectual; Mahmud Mohamed Taha, a religious reformer executed by the Sudanese government; and `Ali `Abd al-Raziq, an Egyptian religious scholar whose writings on the separation of church and state have been controversial since the 1920s. In an analytical introduction, editor Charles Kurzman discusses the history of the liberal tradition in Islam and identifies the main currents in liberal Islamic thought. This collection will be an important resource for scholars and students of Islam, the Middle East, and international affairs, and will also help to redress the imbalance in our perceptions of the Islamic world.

"This important book makes available for the first time in English a selection of writings from Muslim thinkers engaged with the issues of global modernity. Most Euro-Americans have generally had to be content with the skewed stereotypes and soundbites provided by the media, which portray all Muslims as anti-Western fanatics. Thoughtful readers here have access to the alternative voices of 20th-century Muslim intellectual life. The breadth and sophistication of this collection make it the indispensable sourcebook for anyone concerned with modern Islamic reflections on democracy, politics, and religion."--Carl W. Ernst, University of North Carolina

"This book provides a valuable introduction to many significant Muslim thinkers whose importance is ignored by headline hunters who miss the major historical trends. It must become the standard sourcebook for anyone seriously interested in modern and contemporary Muslim thought."--John Voll, Georgetown University

About the Author Charles Kurzman is at Georgia State University.