

Review Article

Muslims and Non-Muslims: Not all Differences are Fabricated, or Arbitrary

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Steven W. Ramey, editor, *Fabricating Difference*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2017; x + 187 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78179-487-6.

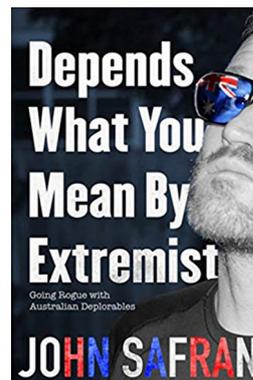
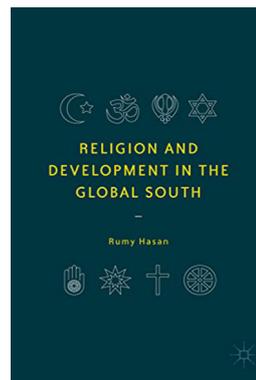
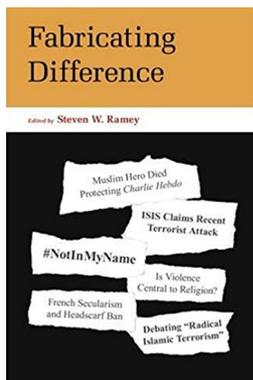
Rumy Hasan, *Religion and Development in the Global South*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; xiv + 225 pp. ISBN: 978-3-319-57062-4.

John Safran, *Depends What You Mean by Extremist: Going Rogue with Australian Deplorables*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2017; 287 pp. ISBN: 978-1-926428-77-2.

William E. Arnal, Willi Braun, Russell T. McCutcheon, editors, *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion: Essays in Honor of Donald Wiebe*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2012; xii + 243 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84553-898-9.

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INTRODUCTION

It is common in the post-modern and politically correct world to deny simple facts, particularly concerning groups that may be in some way be oppressed, further claiming that that the pointing out of such facts is abhorrent. In this essay I discuss one such book, contrasting it with the available evidence. This book, *Fabricating Difference*, gives the impression that pointing out perceived differences,

differentiation, is typically fallacious and immoral, particularly when it comes to Islam. In an ironic twist, the contributors to this book make the usual demands about minority groups – like Muslims – being given a voice, and yet would likely become uncomfortable when Muslims tell them clearly what they think and feel about ostensibly progressive values. I also survey the work of several other authors,

one an ex-Muslim, who stress the importance of objectively discussing the facts. I compare such work with evidence that indicates that mainstream Muslims are indeed very different to mainstream non-Muslims, including Christians and atheists. This will hopefully encourage more honesty and transparency about what most Muslims believe, and whether these beliefs are compatible with prevailing norms in the West.

1. REAL DIFFERENCES

Edited by Religious Studies scholar Steven W. Ramey, *Fabricating Difference* is an interesting collection of essays, largely centred on two primary pieces by Mayanthi L. Fernando and Aaron W. Hughes, that bemoans the othering that takes place when differences are fabricated as similarities are ignored (p. 2). The book does, however, recognise that such fabrications are not “automatically illegitimate”, and can even be beneficial (p. 5). Chapter 1, by Fernando, sets the tone for the collection, by opposing the common perception that ‘Muslims’ and ‘Westerners’ are different (pp. 14-16). She wants to “see France itself [and presumably the West] as a myth” (p. 23), and goes on to note that Muslims have long been in France. Unfortunately for Fernando, she does not provide any evidence that the differentiation is unsubstantiated. In addition, she overlooks the vast amount of evidence that many Muslims and non-Muslims are indeed very different from each other (in regards to moral and political beliefs) – evidence that is strikingly clear, even when we avoid the temptation to essentialise, as the Orientalists of old did.

Not that difference is necessarily and objectively undesirable, I shall not judge here, but many polls (such as Pew’s in 2013) reveal

that people who identify as Muslims, relative to people who identify as non-Muslims, tend to be significantly more opposed to women’s and gay rights,¹ and are far more likely to believe that apostates should be killed (this pertains to averages amongst Muslim communities, not to all individuals; we ought to be careful about generalising – for instance, there are many secular and progressive Sufis).² For example, the poll results show that 87% of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa believe that wives must obey their husbands, and that, amongst Muslims who believe that *shari’a* should be the law of the land, 89% of Pakistani Muslims and 84% of Palestinian Muslims believe adulterers should be stoned to death, and 86% of Egyptian Muslims and 62% of Malaysian Muslims favour the death penalty for apostates. CNN recently reported on a British poll, claiming that 52% of British Muslims “think homosexuality should not be legal”.³ Some researchers in Europe found that “a considerable stability of religiosity or even an increase therein within Muslim immigrant families, in contrast to Christian

1 A colleague suggested that since Russians are in his view very much against homosexual rights, “the West is just as homophobic”. Apart from the contentious issue over whether Russia is Western, what the term ‘homophobic’ actually refers to, and the problematic approach of tarring every member of a group with the same brush (akin to those absurdly claiming that all Muslims are terrorists), there is also the question of grade to consider. For example, British Muslims express anti-gay attitudes to a greater extent than Russians (see further footnotes). And, as a Christian colleague pointed out, while a mainstream Christian may simply disagree with a homosexual’s lifestyle choices, a mainstream Muslim’s views on homosexuality would more likely lead to direct violence or political oppression. Various polls and surveys do indicate this, such as the recent Australian survey that reveals that those who identify as adherents of Christianity – and several other religions – are far more supportive of same sex marriage (discussed soon).

2 <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>. Overview: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview>. Note: all websites accessed 15 February 2018.

3 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/11/europe/britain-muslims-survey/index.html>.

immigrant families, whose religiosity declines over generations”⁴ Other studies indicate that Muslim immigrants are overrepresented in statistics concerning violent and sexual crimes.⁵

Whether or not women’s rights, gay rights, religious freedoms, and the like, should be considered ‘French’ or ‘Western’, or even beneficial, such differentiation seems to be at least partly legitimate. Strangely, Fernando appears to criticise government efforts to craft a more secular ‘French Islam’, as if she were oblivious to the dangers – to vulnerable Westerners – of, say, the ultra-conservative Salafi forms of Islam being exported from Saudi Arabia (p. 32). I applaud Fernando’s concluding call to engage with Muslim interlocutors (pp. 36-37), however had she actually done so herself (such as with Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who wishes to see all churches in Arabia destroyed and proclaimed that girls as young as ten are ready for marriage),⁶ she might have discovered that at least some of this differentiation is indeed justified.

The following chapters tend to continue in this ‘Muslims are unjustly oppressed’ vein. Damon T. Berry’s response, for example, refers to Western bigotry, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia (p. 43), apparently unaware that many mainstream Muslims are also bigoted, anti-Semitic, and even Islamophobic – consider, for

example, the ongoing Sunni-Shia conflicts, and also the actions of ISIS.⁷ Somehow Berry finds that the existence of Muslims who are victims unsettles the “Muslims versus Europe” narrative (pp. 44-45). It is here worth considering that there are many Muslims who victimise other Muslims – we need only consider the plight of many Muslim women – and many Muslims who victimise non-Muslims, none of which Berry cares to mention. Perhaps, like many scholars, Berry is influenced by the guilt over the West’s history of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, while overlooking that Muslims were doing these things centuries before the Western powers.⁸

Moving on, the essay by Tara Baldrick-Morrone explains the discursive strategy of purposely portraying one’s own group as different, in order to play the victim.⁹ The contribution by Vincent E. Burgess finally provides a non-Western oppressor, the strangely ‘fundamentalist’ Hindu in India, but, of course, still finds time to lament the plight of the Indian Muslim. Burgess even refers to Islam as the “mythic enemy of Hindutva” (p. 62, emphasis mine). Given the violent spread of Islam throughout Asia, many Hindus might wonder if ‘historical enemy’ would be the better term.¹⁰ Andie Alexander’s response improves the tone somewhat, recognising that constructing difference is not “necessarily good or bad”, but is “one of many ways in which social groups work to create and maintain themselves and their

4 Konstanze Jacob and Frank Kalter, “Intergenerational Change in Religious Salience among Immigrant Families in Four European Countries,” *International Migration* 51, no. 3 (2013): 38-56.

5 For example, see Martin Hällsten, Ryszard Szulkin, and Jerzy Sarnecki, “Crime as a Price of Inequality?: The Gap in Registered Crime between Childhood Immigrants, Children of Immigrants and Children of Native Swedes,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 53, no. 3 (2013): 456-481.

6 See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-christians-fatwa/europe-bishops-slam-saudi-fatwa-against-gulf-churches-idUSBRE82M1D720120323> and <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/01/17/saudi.child.marriage>.

7 Also known as Islamic State and DAESH.

8 For example, see Ronald Segal, *Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (London: Atlantic, 2002).

9 Christians are the focus here; perhaps a focus on Muslims here would be seen as unseemly, as it is not a favourable portrayal.

10 See, for example, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2008) and Koenraad Elst, *Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2014).

identities” (p. 76).

The highlight of the book is Chapter 7. Hughes decries the tendency for scholars and public figures to deny that extremist Muslims are Muslims. Hughes notes that it is problematic that religion is often seen as internal, apolitical, and nonviolent, entailing that the soldiers of ISIS are ‘inauthentic Muslims’ (p. 78). He boldly asserts that the “religious motivations” of jihadists “cannot be gainsaid”, further criticising the hypocrisy of supposedly forward-thinking and anti/neo-Orientalist scholars who are not supposed to deny Muslims their agency (p. 79). Perhaps this hesitance to think of anything negative about Islam is also why so many mainstream scholars lionise and exaggerate the scientific achievements and progressive nature of certain medieval Muslims, whilst ignoring the bloody conquests, colonising, and slave-trading of earlier – and later – Muslims.¹¹ Hughes correctly notes that ‘Islam’ is neither a religion of peace or of violence, and takes issue with Karen Armstrong’s proclivity for highlighting the political – and presumably irreligious – motivations of jihadists (pp. 80-81). Indeed, mainstream Islam has historically been very political, from its founding, to Muslim colonialism and imperialism over the centuries, to Islam’s status as the state religion of many nations today.¹²

Hughes effectively accuses many scholars of harbouring political agendas (p. 81), and asks that we consider the intolerance of the religious, noting that the Muslims of ISIS also fabricate difference and accuse other Muslims of being inauthentic (pp. 81-82). Further probing,

11 This further reminds me of the so-called anti-racists who make assumptions about a person’s privilege and victimhood, based on their race.

12 Even whilst whitewashing the life of Muhammad, Karen Armstrong acknowledges his violence and politics. See Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

Hughes recognises that globalisation “creates sociopolitical tribalism”, and like President Trump, points to President Obama’s unjustified attempts to portray violent Islamists as ‘un-Islamic’ (pp. 83-84). After warning that biased – and effectively theological apologetic – scholars are in the ears of lawmakers, Hughes bravely agrees with Princeton’s Bernard Haykel on the similarities between ISIS and early Muslims (pp. 86-87). He is in good company. Apart from the jihadists, many secular critics of Islam, liberal Muslims, and even some conservative Muslims acknowledge that ‘extremist’ forms of the faith align quite well with literal or straightforward readings of the Quran.¹³ If only the apparently ignorant rank and file Muslims knew, like the enlightened and non-Muslim scholars Hughes disapproves of, that the Quran does not actually mean what it says.

Thomas J. Whitley’s response to Hughes’ chapter begins by revealing that most mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians in the United States of America support same-sex marriage (p. 92; contrast this with the relationship between Muslim populations and no-voting electorates in Australia’s recent same-sex marriage survey),¹⁴

13 See, for example, the view of liberal Muslim Maajid Nawaz, in Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

14 The highest concentrations of no-voters were in areas with the highest proportions of Muslims in Australia. This caused many Australians to come up with answers besides ‘religion’, and specifically, ‘Islam’. See <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-western-sydney-voted-no-20171116-gzmmjr.html>. Further research revealed that Buddhists, Jews, and Atheists were strongly supportive, Hindus and Christians moderately supportive, and Muslims almost unanimously opposed to legalising same sex marriage. See Francisco Perales, Gary Bouma, and Alice Campbell, “Religion, Support of Equal Rights for Same-Sex Couples and the Australian National Vote on Marriage Equality,” *Sociology of Religion*, no. doi: 10.1093/socrel/sry018 (2018): 1-23; Francisco Perales, Gary Bouma, and Alice Campbell, “Unpacking the Influence of Religion and Religiosity on Support of Equal Rights for Same-Sex Couples in Contemporary Australia” (paper presented at the AASR/NZASR Annual Conference 2017, Sydney, 8th December 2017); and especially the alternate graphs Perales made

indicating that American Christendom does not truly oppress homosexuals even if it does not condone their choices, or at least not to the same extent. It is an interesting response that shows how Christians can also be – sometimes willing (p. 96) – victims of differentiation and the lack thereof, though the dearth of examples showing Muslims as oppressors is still palpable. As if to not lose sight of the book's true aims, the following chapter by Martha Smith Roberts resumes the 'Muslims as victims' narrative, and makes liberal use of liberal scholars' buzzwords like 'Islamophobia' and 'white supremacy'.

Roberts bizarrely refers to examples of Sikhs being attacked by misinformed anti-Muslim bigots in order to "highlight the double standard for non-white, non-Christian bodies" (p. 105), as if this can be extended to the American people as a whole, or the state (contrast this with Saudi government officials executing women accused of adultery). Roberts goes on to note how young Muslims often struggle with being "both American and Muslim" (p. 106), inadvertently revealing that there are indeed non-constructed differences between Muslims and non-Muslims. Roberts strangely seems to endorse these Muslims' efforts to connect with foreign organisations, presumably so they can feel more at ease with their regressive views, and then she has the gall to complain that this "ironically" feeds the perception that these Muslims are "un-American" (p. 107). Roberts, counter-intuitively, seems to oppose the emergence of more 'Western-compatible' liberal Muslim groups and "state laws prohibiting shari'a or Muslim personal law" (pp. 107-108), apparently unaware that shari'a is often utilised in many Muslim-majority (and even in Western) countries to oppress women, gays, the

available to me upon request, which revealed that, with the Christian groups lumped together as 'Christianity', 'Islam' was by far the religious group most opposed.

transgendered, and religious minorities, and which could well be used to curtail her own rights.¹⁵

Her mention of the "black/white racial paradigm" (p. 108) is also concerning, as if East Asians and Latin people play no role; many of the latter interestingly voting for Trump.¹⁶ Finally referring to claims about Obama's background, and acting as if the 'birthers' and white supremacists dominate the state (pp. 108-109), she forgets that the 'non-White' Obama was voted in as President by the mostly-White American people, and that he and his establishment colleagues have been welcoming people of colour from the developing world (and also that the 'non-White' Obama, with the help of his pro-multiculturalism colleagues, dutifully killed record numbers of innocent Muslims in the Middle East).¹⁷ We scholars must be consistent. If we recognise that only a minority of Muslims are terrorists, we ought also recognise that only a minority of non-Muslim Americans are 'deplorables' who are only motivated by racism and greed.¹⁸

In another chapter directly addressing Hughes, Deeksha Sivakumar at once agrees and disagrees with Hughes' sentiments, recognising that, regarding Hinduism, the variegated "textual tradition doesn't fit neatly into the authenticity debate" (p. 113; note that Christianity and Islam also struggle with authenticity issues, despite a more emphasised

15 Elham Manea, *Women and Shari'a Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

16 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/trump-probably-did-better-with-latino-voters-than-romney-did>.

17 See for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/america-dropped-26171-bombs-2016-obama-legacy>. In retrospect, this suggests that his earlier-awarded Nobel Peace Prize was undeserved.

18 Interestingly, the aforementioned research by Pew also reveals that a large portion of Muslims surveyed support violent actions even if they would not personally participate. That information is certainly not insignificant.

textual tradition), whilst also asserting that there are ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ religious traditions (p. 116). In his response, Ian Alexander Cuthbertson also somewhat dismisses Hughes, engaging in his own fabrication of difference by claiming a distinction between religion and superstition, as if there were no superstitious religions or religious superstitions. The final essay, by Charles McCrary, is very much in alignment with the thought of Hughes. He ends by simply asking that we consider our audiences and adapt as necessary (p. 133).

The last word goes to Ramey, in the form of an afterword, who briefly mentions Trump and Bernie Sanders (p. 136), as chief rivals for the Presidency to Hillary Clinton, but passes up on the opportunity to draw attention to the latter’s shameful attempt at fabricating a difference: namely, Clinton’s infamous comment about Trump’s supporters being ‘deplorables.’¹⁹ Ramey does well to acknowledge that there is diversity in minorities (p. 138), though he almost always, directly (p. 142) and indirectly (by selecting the book’s contributions), employs examples of differentiation involving Muslims as the oppressed and White Westerners as oppressors. Why does the book not draw attention to the plight of women in Muslim communities or homosexuals and transgendered people in Muslim states, or remark on how early Muslims treated Jews, Christians, and Pagans during the lifetime of Muhammad?²⁰ Why not note the plight of poor Whites who are oppressed by the wealthy elites and who are still blamed for all the world’s ills, or how Black South Africans

– even politicians – are encouraging crimes, namely theft and murder, against White South Africans?²¹ Ramey then objects to Trump’s differentiation of Muslims, which precedes his own, on the very same page, differentiation when he highlights the second Bush/Republican Iraq war (p. 144). Like so many liberal scholars, Ramey seems to forget that establishment Democrats and Republicans are almost of one party (made more obvious with the rise of outsiders Sanders and Trump) and that the war had heavy bipartisan support. Clinton was for it, and she and Obama later destroyed Libya, which led to many of the issues – including growing religious and political tensions, refugee crises, the rise of ISIS, and the rise of the so-called ‘far right’ and/or alt-right – of today.²² However, Ramey is correct when he explains that labels can go from merely descriptive, to prescriptive (p. 144).

Ramey also rightly claims that it is unfair to label all Trump voters as racist (p.146). Indeed, there are only a handful of major parties, often just two, not necessarily so dissimilar, and it seems unlikely that voters will agree with all of the policies of one, and none of the policies of the other. Ramey is soon back on track, however, alluding to the “arbitrary nature of the differences and similarities that individuals and groups choose to emphasize or ignore” (p. 150). There is nothing arbitrary in the gay woman’s concern that most Muslims, even in the West, have very different views about women and gays, and she may not care that it all might have to do with Western colonialism/

19 She later acknowledged that she handed Trump a political gift. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/09/10/hillary-clinton-calling-trump-supporters-deplorables-handed-him-a-political-gift_a_23203564.

20 For example, LGBT people are routinely arrested and tortured in Saudi Arabia. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/transgender-pakistani-saudi-arabia-tortured-death-amna-meeno-11-custody-lgbt-rights-human-a7607446.html>.

21 <http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/world-economy/bury-them-alive-white-south-africans-fear-for-their-future-as-horrific-farm-attacks-escalate/news-story/3a63389a1b0066b6b0b77522c06d6476>.

22 Additionally, rampant slavery of Africans has made a comeback in Libya. See <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html>.

interventionism or some such. Contrast this with the apparently 'pinkwashed' Republican voters who increasingly embrace the LGBT way of life; some are homosexual themselves, as with many of the Log Cabin Republicans. As is to be expected, instead of focussing on Jews and their views of the Goyim, or the Indian Muslims who wanted, and received, their own state/s (i.e. Pakistan and Bangladesh), Ramey trots out yet more 'anti-Western' and/or 'pro-Islam' examples of differentiation (pp. 153-156), though his call for scholars to avoid reinforcing the 'public transcript' is useful (p. 161).

Fabricating Difference is an interesting book that offers many useful talking points. Differentiation does happen, frequently, and scholars need to be ever wary of who is doing it, and why. Unfortunately, the book is tarnished by the sort of clear political agenda that Hughes, in his outstanding chapter, warns us about. Example after example portrays the West as evil and Muslims as victims. There are no examples of Muslims oppressing Westerners, and few of them oppressing the minorities in their own communities. There are few examples of the victimisation of those unfairly labelled as 'Islamophobes' or 'far right fascists'. There is no mention of the tendency for those on the political left to label those on the right 'undemocratic', even though democratic elections led to conservative governments in the US, the UK, and Australia. No one thought to point out that Saudi Arabia condemns atheists as terrorists and imprisons and even kills homosexuals.²³ Nobody had time to mention that Iranian Muslims force women to wear head coverings.²⁴ Not one contributor

23 See, for example, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-man-sentenced-death-atheism-ahmad-al-shamri-hafar-al-batin-appeal-denied-a7703161.html>.

24 Many Iranian women are bravely protesting this. See [http://www.dw.com/en/iranian-women-defiant-against-](http://www.dw.com/en/iranian-women-defiant-against-compulsory-hijab/a-42465236)

thought the entrapment of gay men by Egyptian authorities to be relevant.²⁵ And this agenda is not only clear, but mistaken, for there are clear differences in the views of (most) Muslims and (most) non-Muslims.

Especially as scholars of religion and typically secular people in general, we should find it non-arbitrary that a large proportion of Muslims around the world believe that apostates – including those Muslims that convert to Christianity – should be punished, even killed.²⁶ This is not a trivial difference and is not rendered irrelevant because of similarities like, say, desiring a better world for our descendants (and of course, 'a better world' is subjective, and could mean a liberal and equal society for some and a fascistic caliphate for others). Ignoring such differences won't make the 'fascists' go away. Quite the opposite. If vocal liberals and progressives will not speak honestly about these issues, and will not hear the concerns of the increasingly unsilent majority, the latter will inevitably move towards the more conservative or 'right-wing' options; which has clearly already happened.

There is also an irony that the book calls for Muslims to be given agency, for adherents of Islam to be taken seriously, yet no polls on what Muslims actually think are appealed to. Where are the voices of the mainstream Muslims that we are supposed to be listening to? Why do they silence the very voices they ostensibly seek to encourage? Muslims often tell us what it is that they think and feel, and such scholars, finding that this information does not fit their narrative, simply ignore them. It is hard not to suspect

[compulsory-hijab/a-42465236](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-man-sentenced-death-atheism-ahmad-al-shamri-hafar-al-batin-appeal-denied-a7703161.html).

25 Regarding the latter, see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-gay-apps/amid-egypts-anti-gay-crackdown-gay-dating-apps-send-tips-to-stop-entrapment-idUSKBN1CS0Z5>.

26 <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia>.

a political agenda. Most of the contributors also bewail the differentiation done by others, oblivious to their own use of the tactic. The book unfortunately engages in the very practice it warns us about. Given the subject of this collection, however, that was always going to be inevitable (akin to a book arguing that there are no absolute truths). Thankfully, other books published recently help to fill in the gaps left by *Fabricating Difference*.

2. REAL CONSEQUENCES

As explained above, there are real differences between cultures and religions. Mainstream Islam is very different to mainstream irreligion, mainstream Christianity, mainstream Confucianism, mainstream Jainism, and so forth. Not necessarily 'better' or 'worse', but different. One recent book that highlights some of the likely practical effects of such different beliefs and views is *Religion and Development in the Global South* by Romy Hasan, who happens to be an ex-Muslim with a South Asian background. Hasan wastes no time, declaring in the first chapter that "The world is divided into nation-states", "each nation-state is characterised by shared ethics and norms, at least among a significant part", "Ethics and norms tend to be strongly derived from the religions of a country, region and society", and notes that "most people in the world are undoubtedly religious—and for them, religion matters" (pp. 1-2). He explains, "How religion with its attendant ethics and norms affects the economy of a polity is the subject matter of this book" (p. 2). Hasan agrees with Weber, namely that Protestant Christianity aided the economic success of the capitalist West, and wonders if other religious traditions, such as those that are anti-materialist, "discourage

entrepreneurship and wealth creation" in certain developing countries (pp. 3-6). This is perhaps too simplistic, which has Hasan adding that, "economic and social development require a move to more secular and rational values" (p. 11).²⁷

Chapter Two focuses on Islam. Hasan reveals that no Muslim-majority country has a HDI (Human Development Index) rank higher than 30, and the countries ranking highest tend to rely on oil exports (pp. 43-45). He finds this to be a weakness in the HDI ranking, since the relatively well-rated – due almost exclusively to its oil wealth – Saudi Arabia routinely discriminates against women (and many other disadvantaged groups) and exploits migrant workers (p. 45). Hasan finds it curious that intellectuals are happy to report on the failings of Muslim-majority countries, though without "directly dwelling on the role played by Islam" (p. 49). He rejects the notion that colonialism is to blame, since "the Islamic world had been stagnant centuries before the colonial powers arrived" (p. 50). Hasan looks to Islamic theology, finding several Quranic passages that seem to discourage scientific thinking (p. 53). Of particular interest is his citing of a paper by Timur Kuran, who examined "the reasons for the economic ascent of religious minorities (notably Christians and Jews) under Muslim rule, locating the core reason as residing in their ability to opt out of Islamic laws" (p. 58). The role of Islam during the 'Muslim Golden Age' is downplayed, as is becoming increasingly common, utilising Rodney Stark's argument

27 It is worth noting that it is likely that the Protestant Reformation made the West more conducive to secular and pluralistic thinking. A thorough resource on this is Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012). Also consider that the productivity of many Muslims may be affected by the many disruptions to work caused by prayer and fasting.

that “to the extent that Muslim elites acquired a sophisticated culture, they acquired it from their subject peoples” (p. 61). Hasan correctly adds that “the major thinkers of the Islamic “golden age” were, in fact, Muslim heretics (or, more accurately, free thinkers) and invariably hostile to religion” (p. 62). Hasan believes that the Muslim world is relatively uninterested in the progresses made outside it, noting “that Spain [itself not the greatest example of a successful nation] translates more books in a single year than the entire Arab world has in the past *thousand years*” (p. 64). Hasan largely blames many Muslims’ insistence on Quranic literalism, reasoning that “Orwellian typology (from his 1984) is most apposite here: any viewpoint that is critical of Islamic doctrines and practices is deemed a “thought crime” and is prevented by a most complete indoctrination from a very young age” (p. 66). Hasan also raises the effect of Islam’s five pillars, opining that “the undertaking of prayers has a significant, deleterious, effect on aggregate output and efficiency” and cites “mounting evidence to show that fasting in the month of Ramadan has a negative effect on health which, in turn, has an adverse impact on productivity and economic output” (pp. 67-72).

Hasan also has much to say about regions of the world where Hinduism, Confucianism, and Catholicism dominate, but that lies outside the scope of this essay.

3. REAL DIVERSITY

While many academics may feel compelled to deny – even despite the evidence – that there are real differences between various groups (without which there would not actually be real diversity), such as mainstream Muslims and non-Muslims, people outside the Academy

typically have more freedom in expressing their views and voicing their concerns. Working against the tendency to blame the world’s ills, including the oppression of Muslims and ‘Islamophobia’, on White supremacy are many of the laypersons portrayed in John Safran’s equally hilarious and thought-provoking *Depends What You Mean by Extremist*. While much of the focus, and no doubt intent, was to mock ‘far-right’ or ‘anti-Islam’ groups such as the United Patriots Front, and to ridicule extremists in general, the book highlights something that is perhaps unexpected about the ‘anti-Islam movement’, which is all too happy to ‘fabricate the difference’ that Muslims are somehow different: it is an incredibly diverse ‘rainbow coalition’. It does not take long for Safran to note that around half of the ‘Islamophobes’ at a Reclaim Australia protest were non-White, with ethnic Jews among their ranks (pp. 3, 6), and he recalls how he witnessed the unsettling scenario of White ‘pro-Muslims’ trying to silence a non-White, ‘anti-Muslim’ immigrant (p. 12).

Page after page, Safran introduces readers to individuals that disrupt the mainstream narratives. He introduces us to the fiercely pro-Western and pro-Jewish Danny Nalliah, who hails from Sri Lanka, and wishes for Australia to be multiracial, but not multicultural (pp. 2-8), and whose Christian church claims members of many races; the half Italian migrant and half Aboriginal Ralph Cerminara, who has an Asian wife, ends up as left wing on political quizzes, and laments that so much more is supposedly done for Muslim migrants entering Australia than its traditional owners (pp. 23-27); the White Muslim ‘extremist’ who complains about racism in the Middle East and ‘admits’ that Muslims and the left-wingers who defend them have different goals (pp. 30-31); the Sufi Muslim who

justifies the killing of non-Muslims (p. 43); the White 'anti-racists' trying to suppress the voices of turban-wearing Indian 'Islamophobes' (pp. 60-61); the 'Islamophobes' opposed to racism, sexism, and Nazism (p. 75); the Arabic UPF supporter who argues with a White Islamophile who believes that love can overcome all (p. 80); the apparently liberal Indonesian Muslim who parties with UPF members (pp. 88-90); the Aboriginal woman lambasting an Aboriginal man for converting to Islam (pp. 103-104); the Pacific Islanders who oppose Islam (p. 123); the Muslim at a mosque open day casually spreading anti-Semitic hate and conspiracy theories (p. 134); the UPF member who rejected the chance to kill Muslims in Afghanistan (pp. 135-137); the left-wing woman who did not care about a right-wing female victim of domestic violence (p. 167); the left-wing people tolerating Muslim hate crimes against Jews (pp. 182-187); the obvious but little-mentioned racism of many Jews who see themselves as part of a 'master race' (p. 191); the Muslim abusing the author for being an ethnic Jew (p. 155); the White-skinned multiculturalist (Safran himself) who was 'proud' to let some Black-on-White violence happen, though he could have prevented it (p. 180); the man who hates Lebanese culture, though he is of Lebanese extraction (p. 205); the Palestinian Australians harbouring ill will against Jewish Australians (p. 209); the Islamist who does not feel oppressed in Australia (p. 214); the multi-ethnic supporters of Christian and nationalistic politician Fred Nile (p. 238); the Muslims who oppose homosexuality (p. 239); and the socialists who were pleased with a Trump win, because it signifies that the establishment can be beaten and that important issues are coming to the fore (p. 275).

Safran also delights in highlighting hypocrisies, such as leftists using classist terms

such as 'bogan' (p. 59), and notes that a major news network chose not to air an interview with Danny Nalliah, though he is a Person of Colour (perhaps because of his 'Islamophobia', or worse, the notion that opposition to Islam is not limited to far-right White Westerners) (p. 196). He also recognises the curious situation where certain left-wing figures are happy to justify 'non-structural' 'left-wing violence', but perceive merely engaging with right-wing people in conversations to be the greater crime (p. 159). Furthermore, in an interview, Safran says that the 'anti-Islam movement' has been whitewashed and claims that "There's a lot of people who have horrible experiences overseas and so that's why they become part of the anti-Islam movement. Even former Muslims who've left."²⁸ He adds that Hindu gripes with Islam "goes back way further – hundreds of years – further than Pauline Hanson or the United Patriots Front" and ends by noting, "I think our right-wing parties ARE multicultural and I think it's useful to swallow the medicine and acknowledge that that's how it is, instead of having this facile analysis that it's just white people vs brown people. It's messier than that."

The points that non-Muslims who other Muslims may be non-White/non-Western and that Muslims also dabble in othering is well made, and space is limited here, so I shall refrain from discussing the so-called 'Islamophobia' of Muslim reformers such as Maajid Nawaz, Mohammad Tawhidi, and Asra Nomani (who voted for Trump).

28 <https://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/article/2016/06/23/john-safran-says-were-white-washing-anti-islam-movement-australia>.

4. REAL NERVE

While it may often not be appropriate for scholars to be *prescriptive*, they should always be at liberty to be *descriptive*. They should be able to observe the differences between cultures and religions, and objectively report on them. This brings to mind the book *Failure and Nerve*, and the great Don Wiebe, who charged that “the academic study of religion suffers from a failure of intellectual nerve”; the editors and many of the contributors sharing “the view that conceptualizing religion as an element of the mundane world of human doings is the first requirement of a public inquiry into the history and function of religion” (p. vii). Interestingly, in the first chapter proper Matthew Day takes an opposing view, strangely finding it unimportant whether religious stories are “*true, false, or an outright lie*” (pp. 39-41). With friends like these, who needs enemies like Trump and his – increasingly reasonable – accusations of ‘fake news’? More agreeable contributions follow, with highlights coming from the amusingly assertive Russell McCutcheon, who finds ‘crypto-theologians’ to be uncritical and ignorant (pp. 78-79), and Johannes Wolfart, who claims that, “practitioners of Religious Studies still habitually suspect each other of hidden agendas” (p. 102).

More relevant to this review essay’s theme, Herbert Berg recognises that crypto-theology pervades Islamic studies, even though many scholars of Islam are secular (p. 112). Berg wonders if the common focus on Sufism, as the “nice face of Islam”, is due to some political bias (p. 114). I can personally attest to this phenomenon. In an introductory unit on religion that I contributed some lectures to, three hours was dedicated to Islam. One hour discussed the life of Muhammad; one hour focused on

the Rashidun Caliphate; and one hour was dedicated to Sufism, despite its minority status within Islamdom.²⁹ No time was dedicated to the beliefs and practices of mainstream Muslims today, or Islam’s role in contemporary geopolitics, and little time was spent on the murky origins of the Quran, despite much of the time devoted to Christianity being spent on mainstream – and even radical – Biblical criticism. Berg also points out that revisionism should not necessarily be considered rude or racist (pp. 117-119). In his chapter, the now familiar Aaron Hughes effectively concurs with Berg, noting that many scholars of Islam tend to think that the forms of Islam “practiced by the Taliban, Saddam Hussein, Wahhabi and neo-Wahhabi groups – are somehow inauthentic precisely because they stray from a pure, divine, and revealed original message” (pp. 142-143). Hughes goes on to accuse many scholars of Islam of preferring a ‘confessional’ approach (p. 144). In any case, the message of *Failure and Nerve* is clear: critiquing Islam and critiquing religion in general is perfectly respectable, and is even necessary if Religious Studies is going to be truly objective and scientific.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All of these books offered food for thought. I wish to clarify that I do not in this essay wish to judge religions and cultures as being right or wrong, morally good or evil. I find it unhelpful to think of Western culture as superior or inferior to non-Western cultures, or Muslims as more or less scrupulous than non-Muslims. Unencumbered by such notions, I only wish to speak in terms of ‘pragmatics’³⁰

29 <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation>.

30 Or ‘practicalities’.

and ‘preferences’.³¹ Different peoples believe different things, and, accordingly, perform different actions. These different actions will produce different outcomes. Some people will find certain outcomes desirable, and others may find the same outcomes to be appalling. Therefore, people express preferences about these outcomes, and ponder whether they could and should influence them, such as, in democracies, utilising their right to vote.

Like the many brave contributors to *Failure and Nerve*, scholars and laypersons alike ought to be able to comfortably consider the differences between various peoples, and to express any opinions about their preferences regarding them. Differentiation is not always fallacious and/or immoral. No one should be privileged so as to be immune from this process, which already happens ubiquitously, in various ways. Not even Muslims. If Muslims tell us that they believe things that are typically considered reprehensible in the West, we should not ignore them, and we should have honest discussions about the likely effects of multiculturalism, immigration, and related issues.

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31 To be transparent, I personally prefer ‘progressive’ values and individual rights. I find many Muslims’ thoughts on women, LGBT people, minorities, and people of other religions (and non-religions), to be utterly reprehensible.

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