

Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World

Written by Administrator

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Ernst, Carl. (2003) *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. [Chapter 4 - Ethics and Life in the World, part on Islamic Religious Ethics, pp. 108-118.]

From Publishers Weekly: Ernst, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is not a stranger to Islam-related controversy. His recommendation of Michael Sells's book *Approaching the Qur'an* to the UNC Summer Reading Program for incoming freshmen spurred an international firestorm. *Following Muhammad* itself was rejected by the publisher that had commissioned the manuscript, as some editors there objected to publishing a book that could be construed as supporting terrorism. Despite these obstacles, Ernst brought the book to another press with rewarding results: it is a pleasure to read. Ernst has a multilayered and self-assured understanding of Islam, and his writing exemplifies a fluency in explaining it that is unique to him, even compared to better-known scholars of the religion. Delicate and complex points about Islam as a religion and culture, about Sufism, and even about Osama bin Ladin, flow off the page effortlessly, with only a few spots that are too abstract. Rather than addressing the standard introductory information about Islam, like the Five Pillars, he has organized his book by themes, with chapters on topics such as ethics and spirituality. The book's greatest strength is Ernst's unrelenting but well-reasoned critique of how the West has consistently marginalized Islam and Muslims from the first encounters onward. Ernst is fair, however-while he admonishes the West for indulging in negative and inaccurate stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, he calls upon Muslims to participate fully in the pluralistic society the world has become.

From Booklist: Ernst is highly regarded for his books about Sufism (*The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 1997) and his brilliant translations of Sufi texts. But in this compelling, if occasionally disorganized, book, Ernst introduces the larger Islamic world and its history in engaging, thought-provoking prose. The overarching argument here is that the West ought not understand Islam as a monolith, that debate and diversity are inherent in Islam and were encouraged by the Prophet. So while most introductions to Islam give Shi'ism and Sufism short shrift, they are presented here as vital facets of Islamic belief. Although the text skips around historically, readers will come away with a good understanding of the different schools of Islamic thought and practice. Special attention is paid to the hot-button topics: gender and veiling, the relationship between Islam and democracy, and Islamist radicalism, for example. Ernst's obvious passion for Islam comes through quite beautifully here, and the rare mix of clear writing and careful scholarship makes this an important purchase for any Islamic studies collection.

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