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# Asra Q. Nomani, *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam*

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**Asra Q. Nomani, *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam*. Harper San Francisco, 2005.**

Asra Nomani, a Wall Street Journal correspondent and a much in demand author, traveled to Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage to try to assess her relationship with her childhood faith. Her mosque in West Virginia will not permit women in the front door or in the prayer room where men "might be distracted by the presence of women." Her pilgrimage to Mecca provided a window into Islam's earliest days. She walked in the footsteps of the Prophet Mohammad and thought much about the differences between Islam's beginning and its current state. While I was touched by her earnestness, I concluded that she was rearranging the furniture on the Titanic. Islam has more problems today than a rearrangement of furniture can fix.

Since the Islamist attack on America on 9/11/2001, the Muslim world has been in chaos. The initial reaction of many Muslims was denial: not believing it possible that Muslims would carry out a terrorist attack on American civilians. Rumor mills churned out explanations that it was really the CIA or Israelis who did this deed to make Muslims look bad. When it was soon made clear that the 19 murderers were all Muslim and that 15 of them were Saudis, the next round of protests from the Muslim world was that Islam is really a religion of peace, and that these perpetrators were somehow influenced by forces other than Islam. American government officials hastened to promote this view, lest there be a violent reaction against otherwise law-abiding Muslims in the United States.

Of course it is commendable that violence against ordinary Muslims did not happen. That speaks well for Americans. But in the aftermath of 9/11 and similar Islamist attacks in Istanbul, Madrid, and London, we need to reexamine the notion that Islam is a religion of peace. Islam is a religion that is 1500 years old and like the other major religions has a very checkered history. Whatever Islam was in the 7th century was no longer true in the 12<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The Christianity of 50 AD was entirely different from that of 1500, when the Inquisition was in full force, and different again during the religious wars, and different again today with the rise of secularism. Furthermore, religion when not aided by the state arm is very different from a church with compulsion.

The West has gone through the transformation from state-enforced religion to religion that can only work through choice—freedom to leave, freedom to join another, or freedom to have no religion at all.

The Islamic world has not yet begun this transformation. In Europe and the United States, Islamic law is unenforceable when at variance with secular law. British Muslims cannot cut off hands or stone adulteresses with impunity. In Germany, a spate of "honor killings" of young women accused of unchaste behavior has been met by German law enforcement. The life-and-death power of a father over his children practiced in Pakistani villages runs afoul of Scotland's law when the victims are Scottish citizens.

However, in Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen, Islamic "Sharia" law has state enforcement. Iran, Pakistan, and other Muslim majority nations have mixed law. In urban areas, there is much less enforcement of Sharia than in rural areas. Afghanistan is in the process of transforming from the Taliban-enforced Sharia to modern jurisprudence, which will benefit urban areas well before the traditional villages and tribes.

Everywhere among educated Muslims, regardless of where they are living, soul-searching is in process. The emergence of Islamism, a religious fascist movement that militantly enforces puritanical Islam, has propelled people into thinking about what Islam is really about. Islamists have declared war, not only against the Christian and Jewish West, but against traditional or more modernized Muslims around the world.

Asra Nomani's pilgrimage opened her eyes to the discrepancy between what she thought was Mohammad's mission and the practices of fundamentalist Islam today. There is no such movement as "Reformed Islam," but because of her efforts and those of other American Muslims with liberal interpretations of their religion, there may soon be such a movement. Nomani has already staged sit-ins at her mosque, called upon American law to challenge her mosque's board on its discriminatory rules (it is a tax exempt organization), and banded with other liberal Muslims to create a new mosque where for the first time a woman led the call to prayer.

All of this is to be commended, but it is still just moving the furniture on the Titanic. Nomani approached her problems with Islam by picking and choosing among the commentaries in the Koran and its companion piece, the Hadith, in which are the memories of the family and friends of the Prophet Mohammad after his death. She did not even bother with the Sharia, which is the Islamic code of law that has no mechanism for change over time. Ninth century Sharia law is hopeless.

The only thing that comes through about the Prophet Mohammad's mission was summed up in the basic five pillars of Islam: affirmation

that there is only one god, prayer daily, fasting one month a year, alms to the poor and widowed, and a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime. This is the core of a valid religion, and the rest is history and commentary. Even I, as a resolute secularist, find these rules impressive and think that if one must be religious at all, this is not an unacceptable modern choice.

Modern Judaism and Protestantism have already taken this road with their own religions, which seem to be providing for the spiritual needs of their communities. I hope Islam can come to this position some day. It is time for the big ideas, not the parsing of some extremely questionable ancient religious texts.

Laina Farhat-Holzman