

Ibn Warraq. *Virgins? What Virgins? and Other Essays*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Ibn Warraq's new collection *Virgins? What Virgins? and Other Essays* (hereafter, *Virgins*) joins the author's growing body of controversial writings, written for reasons of privacy and security under an Arabic pseudonym. This volume is a collection of eighteen essays on a variety of different but related subjects—classical Islam, Western civilization and its encounter with Islam, the critique (or lack thereof) of Islam by scholars of the subject, and the analysis of contemporary political Islam. In spite of the pseudonym, *Virgins* is probably Ibn Warraq's most personal writing to date; he devotes an entire chapter of the book to his religious and ideological upbringing, during the course of which he transformed himself from an Indian Muslim into an English rationalist. The book, especially the autobiographical material in it, makes for fascinating reading, and will rightly join the genre of apostate or Islam-critical writing that has appeared during the past decade.¹

The essays in *Virgins* are somewhat unevenly written, and ironically, the title essay "Virgins? What Virgins?" is one of the shortest pieces in the book. As in his other works, however, Ibn Warraq focuses here upon the core elements of classical Islam, seeking to place the totalitarian and dominationist ideology of political Islam within the context of its classical roots, and developing the idea that contemporary Islam is bound to maintain itself through domination, persecution, and demonization of the Other via the core elements it inherits from those classical roots. The book substantiates its thesis through an abundance of examples, some of them quite unpalatable to pious readers.

Ibn Warraq is clearly angered by the privileged position that Islam occupies in academia and the mainstream media. He exposes this fact through an insistent emphasis on precisely those elements of Islam that are most assiduously avoided by contemporary scholars (though generally not by older scholars) in the name of political correctness, for which he has unbridled contempt. These controversial elements include the more outlandish features of the Qur'an; the life of Muhammad; the disgusting, misogynistic, ahistorical, or intolerant elements of the *hadith* (tradition) literature; the numerous examples of intolerance toward women, non-Muslims, and others to be found in the legal literature (the basis for the *sharia*); and other taboo subjects.

¹ For example, works by Wafa Sultan, Nonie Darwish, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and to some extent Irshad Manji, in addition to the numerous essays at Ali Sina's website: <http://www.faithfreedom.org/>.

As a scholar of Islam myself, I find Ibn Warraq's attitude to be very refreshing, and his scholarship for the most part to be accurate and devastating in pinpointing weaknesses in Muslim orthodoxy. His third essay, "Some Aspects of the History of Koran Criticism, 700 CE to 2005 CE," could almost serve as a history of our field, and of its systematic failure to critique the foundational texts of Islam as those of other faiths have been critiqued.² It is an embarrassment for Islamic Studies that no critical text of the Qur'an has been produced.³ However, even were this basic, elemental work done, there would be still a great more to be done in order to counter one of the most fundamental Muslim presuppositions—namely, that the text of the Qur'an has remained absolutely unaltered since the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century of the Common Era. Ibn Warraq counters this nonsense, which one hears on a regular basis even from educated Muslims who should know better, by demonstrating the prevalence of variant readings of the Qur'anic text.⁴ That the existence of these variants, known as *qira'at*, demonstrates the falsity of the orthodox Muslim position vis-à-vis the Qur'an is obvious, and yet bizarrely rejected even by mainstream scholars.⁵

About half of *Virgins* discusses technical textual issues, including the Qur'an and its variants, as well as translations of problematic sections of the text that are either evaded by contemporary Muslims, or reflexively described as "taken out of context." Although this section of the book is highly interesting to a scholar of Islam, and is fundamental to critical engagement with Muslims, it does not make for easy reading. Midway through the book we get to the title essay, which discusses the question of whether the *hur al-'ayn* ("houris")—the human sex-toys of paradise so graphically described in the classical literature⁶—are in the end women or raisins. The latter interpretive option is the one proposed by Christoph Luxenberg in his book, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of*

² See for a discussion of this failure, F. E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1991), pp. 291-315.

³ Such work was begun in 1980, but stalled in 1989 due to lack of funding; see "Codex San'a I: A Qur'anic Manuscript from Mid-1st Century Hijra," accessed online at: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/soth.html>.

⁴ It is further ironic that the existence of either seven or fourteen canonical "readings" of the Qur'an is accepted in Islam, and yet the implications of this fact for the "unaltered" nature of the text are not.

⁵ See Hamza Andreas Tzortis, "Luxenberg & Puin: Origins & Revisions: Responding to Dispatches," accessed online at: <http://www.theinimitablequran.com/respondingtodispachthes.pdf>.

⁶ And even by present-day clerics, such as Omar al-Sweilem; see "Saudi Cleric al-Sweilem Extols Paradise's Black-Eyed Virgins," September 30, 2009, accessed online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60kEEkWgzE>.

the Language of the Koran.⁷ There is no doubt about the controversial nature of Luxenberg's claims, which amount to reading parts of the Qur'an as if they were written not in Arabic (as has almost universally been assumed) but in Aramaic (Syriac), the Christian language common throughout Syria-Palestine during the time of Muhammad (and until today among elements of the Maronite Church).

In my opinion, interesting as this reinterpretation of the *houris* may be, it does not have much relevance to *contemporary* Islam, because so few Muslims are even aware of it, and because there is a vast lore built up through fourteen centuries, interpreting the *houris* as the pleasure-women of paradise. Two groups have difficulties with the conventional interpretation of *houris*. The first consists of those Muslim modernists who live in the West, and either experience embarrassment at such sexualized descriptions of paradise or experience the same at the motivational pull exercised by these descriptions on would-be suicide-bombers (a.k.a. "martyrs"). The second consists of those non-Muslim apologists for Islam who wish to oppose the image of the Muslim paradise popularized by Christians in the European Middle Ages. It would of course be very nice if we could, when discovering the "true" or "original" meaning of a word or phrase in a given holy text, have that new meaning instantaneously accepted by believers. The fact remains that religions and their histories are more a matter of what is commonly believed or accepted by their adherents than the original meanings of the words in their Scriptures.

I have stronger objections to Ibn Warraq's seventh essay, "Islam, the Middle East and Fascism," in which he seeks to demonstrate that the ideology inherent in Islam is a totalitarian one with elements in common with fascism. He correctly qualifies this a bit: "It is important to bear in mind the distinction between theory and practice, the distinction between what Muslims ought to do and what they in fact do" (p. 287). He then carefully lays out the difference between the textual sources concerning the religion, rightly dividing them into the Qur'an (Islam₁) and the legal structure of Islam (Islam₂), as distinct from the manner in which, as a matter of history, Muslims have acted upon these sources across fourteen centuries (Islam₃, or Muslim civilization).⁸ I agree with Ibn Warraq that Islam₁ and Islam₂ are a great deal more totalitarian and intolerant than Islam₃. However, it seems to me neither important nor historically accurate to compare Islam with *fascism*, despite the currency of this practice among certain contemporary intellectuals.⁹ The use of "fascism"

⁷ Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, trans. Markus Gross (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007 [2000]).

⁸ Cf. the similar but subtly different three-way distinction drawn by Bernard Lewis; see Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996), p. 54.

⁹ The phrase seems to have been coined in 1990 by Malise Ruthven, but was popularized more recently after 9/11 by the late Christopher Hitchens. See Christopher

amounts to mere demonization of Islam, albeit one which Ibn Warraq tries to substantiate by means of a great many quotations. Despite these efforts, I do not think that the comparison of Islam with fascism facilitates non-Muslims' understanding of Islam, since the elements brought out by the comparison are generically totalitarian, and not particularly useful in real-life dealings with Muslims.

Ibn Warraq is on much stronger ground, in my view, when he attacks apologists for Islam, including many who are or were prominent in the field of Islamic Studies. He divides these into two basic groups: (1) those Christians such as W. Montgomery Watt, who romanticize Islam, and are apparently unwilling to subject it to serious critique, given their ecumenical leanings and their belief in the sacredness of its claims; and (2) those post-modernists such as John Esposito, who are basically cultural relativists and for whom the serious critique of Islam is taboo because Muslims are the Other whom Westerners are forbidden to study in a non-sympathetic or objective manner, à la Edward Said's claims in *Orientalism*.¹⁰ Ibn Warraq rightly notes that the latter group, which is currently much more influential than the former, especially in policy issues, is immune to any self-examination as to their intellectual or political track record. If Esposito spent most of his time prior to September 11, 2001 denying that Muslim radicals had any violent intentions toward the United States, those denials do not seem to have dented his credibility in the scholarly and policy-making worlds in the way that they should have.¹¹

In his last few essays, Ibn Warraq makes a spirited defense of Western rationalism and reason, as contrasted both with postmodern cultural relativism and Islam, emphasizing in particular Western society's role in promoting tolerance and free speech. Ibn Warraq is unabashedly a proponent of Western exceptionalism, and in stark opposition to current academic trends, notes a great many ways in which Europe and the United States have led the

Hitchens, "Of Sin, the Left, and Islamic Fascism," *The Nation*, September 4, 2001, accessed online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/sin-left-islamic-fascism#>; and Christopher Hitchens, "Defending 'Islamofascism'," *Slate*, October 22, 2007, accessed online at: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2007/10/defending_islamofascism.html. See also Alexander Stille, "The Latest Obscenity Has Seven Letters," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2003, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/13/books/the-latest-obscenity-has-seven-letters.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; and William Safire, "Islamofascism," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 1, 2006, accessed online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/01/magazine/01wwln_safire.html.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹¹ Cf. John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

world in the protection of conscience. It is no wonder, then, that Ibn Warraq's attitude toward the academy is rather ambivalent. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that many of the figures he criticizes in the book will actually read his writings or consider the issues he raises.

Virgins is a great read. I'm inclined to think that the book's lengthy Qur'anic section would best have been placed toward the end of the book, but perhaps Ibn Warraq wanted to make certain that the reader of the later, more political essays knew that they were based on solid scholarship, and that he himself has a good command of the sources (as indeed he does). There are in any case few dull moments in *Virgins*; most readers should find something in it to capture their interest.

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