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Book Review: On Understanding Islam.

Understanding Islam: Position of Knowledge. **Bryan S. Turner**, Edinburgh:
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Firmanda Taufiq

Ph.D. Candidate in Middle Eastern Studies,
State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta
Email: firmandataufiq@gmail.com

This book seeks to contribute to the existing literature on understanding Islam. The author argues recent events that involve Islam – ranging from the fall of the Afghanistan government, the Iran nuclear debate, political crises in Tunisia, and the perennial Israel and Palestine conflict – “defy the conditions for successful intercultural dialogue and understanding (between Orientalists and scholars or clergies who support Islam: Editor), while at the same time making such dialogue more important and necessary” (see p. 174). However, the problem is not only the external social and political events that strengthen the prejudice or Islamophobia among Orientalists or Christians but also about Islam’s religious and cultural barriers. Some Muslim scholars take God very seriously and hinder rationalism, preventing inter-religious and intercultural dialogue.

In this book, Bryan Turner examines the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions of knowledge. The debate about the positions of knowledge has long been central in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology in their quest for understanding other cultures (see p. 38). The author argues the insiders, who practice their religion and belong to a religious community, are more reliable witnesses to the nature of their religion or the nature of their communal culture, than social scientists, who are generally not members of the insiders’ community. Insiders tend to be more knowledgeable about their own community and are more sympathetic witnesses than outsiders. On the other hand, outsiders can be more objective and also understand aspects of the insiders’ religion or culture that are ignored or overlooked by insiders.

To understand Islam well, the author offers a combination of ‘understanding’ and ‘explanation’. Understanding occurs when after some dialogue, two puzzled people of different camps come to some basis of agreement. Explanation might also start from this puzzlement, but it “has a different methodology for coming to conclusions” (see p. 175). Unlike other scholars, the author maintains a difference between understanding and explanation because “mutual and meaningful understanding also requires some level of objectivity” (p. 175). Thus, to understand Islam well, any outsiders, such as Orientalists or Christian scholars, need to know deeply about Islam, in terms of Islamic culture and ways of life, and exercise their judgment about Islam objectively and wisely. However, for Turner, this is not enough: he argues that outsiders’ understanding of Islam will be more complete after they first understand themselves.

This book offers a good contribution to the study of understanding Islam in the sense that, unlike other scholars, Turner distinguishes between understanding and explanation, providing useful clarity to these terms. Other scholars tend to blend understanding and explanation, rendering the distinction between the terms obscure. However, in some parts, the author has failed to explain clearly some of his arguments, in accessible terms. For example, Turner argues that outsiders also need to understand themselves first to truly understand Islam, but does not explain exactly what this involves. Instead, to explain this, he simply quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer: "The general process of reaching an understanding between persons and the process of understanding per se are both language-events that resemble the inner conversation of the soul with itself." (p. 175). Nevertheless, this book offers an advanced and sophisticated analysis of the study of understanding Islam, and it is a worthy read by scholars at the advanced level who are interested in the study of this topic.