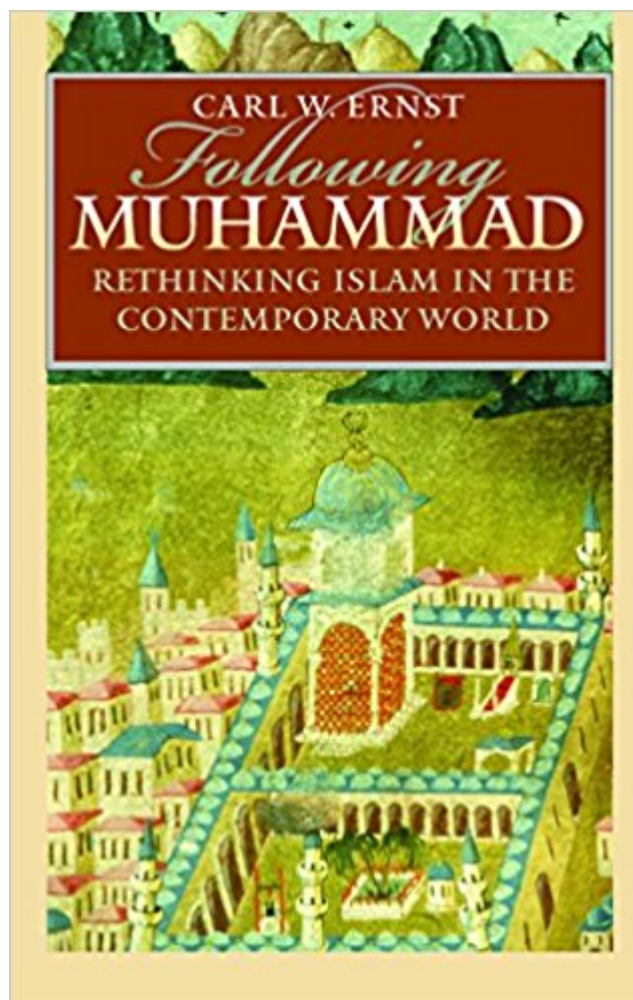




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# Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam In The Contemporary World (Islamic Civilization And Muslim Networks)



## Synopsis

Avoiding the traps of sensational political exposes and specialized scholarly Orientalism, Carl Ernst introduces readers to the profound spiritual resources of Islam while clarifying diversity and debate within the tradition. Framing his argument in terms of religious studies, Ernst describes how Protestant definitions of religion and anti-Muslim prejudice have affected views of Islam in Europe and America. He also covers the contemporary importance of Islam in both its traditional settings and its new locations and provides a context for understanding extremist movements like fundamentalism. He concludes with an overview of critical debates on important contemporary issues such as gender and veiling, state politics, and science and religion.

## Book Information

Series: Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press; New edition edition (August 30, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807855774

ISBN-13: 978-0807855775

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 22 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #62,989 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Rituals & Practice](#) #8 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Muhammed](#) #11 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Sufism](#)

## Customer Reviews

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 himself 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. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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. John GreenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Simply put, this is a well written and informative book that I would whole-heartedly recommend to anyone interested in Islam, especially someone approaching the subject for the first time. Ernst begins the book by looking at how Islam has been misunderstood, sometimes very deliberately, in the "Western" (essentially Christian) world for the last 1400 years. In doing so, which, at least to me, accounted for some of the most interesting reading in the book, some will no doubt accuse Ernst of acting as an apologist, but the evidence he brings to bear on the issue, in an attempt to set the record straight, is so well presented, both in terms of writing style and in the appropriateness of historical examples etc., that such a line of argumentation is exposed as amateurish and specious. Ernst clearly knows what he's talking about and one certainly gets the sense that he is merely scratching the surface in marshaling evidence to support his various arguments and points. This last

issue dove-tails into the only significant critique I have of the book - namely, that I wanted MORE detail, MORE examples etc. As I mentioned, Ernst is a great reservoir of information on Islam and one cannot therefore help but want to hear more from him. However, I certainly understand the need to limit the scope of any one portion of the book, and there is a good deal ahead after these opening issues. The remainder of the book looks very much like a somewhat unconventional, though still very good, introductory text on Islam - with sections on Muhammad, the Qur'an, Sufism, ethics etc. To conclude, one of the reasons I like Ernst's book is because he challenges us to think twice about how we look at the world - he asks us to reflect critically on certain issues (colonialism, Western scholarship, Christianity etc.) that, for some, might be difficult or awkward. But, asking us to do this does not make him an apologist for radical Islamists - it simply means he's painting a more complex picture and, if there is anything we should admit about Islam and its study, it's that 1400 years of history demands such complexity.

a must read for anyone interested in Islam today

There are many books and articles written on Islam and its ways and history. I found Ernst's book to be exceptional in the way it interacted with the reader and brought the author's fresh perspective to challenge the orthodox way of describing Islam as a religion and force. I read this in conjunction with Rippin's "Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices" and found "Following Muhammed" to be much more easy to read and follow.

Ernst gives a powerful discussion on understanding the scope and complexity of the Islamic tradition, its culture, its people and the dynamic context from which many in the Western world have often been confused. This is a good read and an important text in approaching any level of understanding of Islam with integrity.

A very objective analysis by an American, this read should be a compulsory part of curriculum so that students (read future leaders) have a very balanced view of Islam.

Ernst's Following Muhammed is an excellent introduction to the history of the Islamic faith and where it is today. As one of the earlier reviewers points out, the book is aimed mainly at readers who have little to no prior knowledge of the religious tradition, and I certainly fell into this category at the time I read the book. The book definitely seems to be a response to the negative image that is

frequently being cast upon Muslims in the recent years. Ernst goes through the centuries of Muslim history and describes how the way the world has seen the religion has been distorted by what he calls "political implications." He shows how the political agendas involving Islam, both from within and from its at times tumultuous relationship to Judaism and Christianity has shaped what the world sees as the single, monolithic "Islam." In doing so, he makes a thoughtful case for the religion's diversity without being an apologist. All in all, I highly recommend this book as a starting point to the study of Islam. It is a very fast and interesting read, and provides a much more accurate and broad understanding of one of today's "hot issues" that is thankfully spin-free.

I liked Carl Ernst's book "Following Muhammad" because it provided a clear, simple introduction to the basic principles of Islam, and did not necessarily try and defend it from all of the criticism that it receives, but just presented it as how he views and understands it. This book was very easy to follow and understand, even for someone who does not know much about Islam or the beliefs which surround it. It starts from the very beginning and discusses Muhammad's role, the different parts of the text, the significance of the Qur'an, and more. I also enjoyed the intricate pieces of art that were included in the chapters. Instead of already jumping into the subject of Islam, and assuming that readers understand much about its history and origin, Ernst, unlike other authors I have recently read, uses simple language and easy to understand descriptions of the religion and its traditions. The only part of the book that I did not like was that sometimes I had wished that Ernst include possibly some more comparisons to difference between Islam and other faiths, so that people who understand or follow those might be able to better recognize differences or similarities to what they understand or believe.

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