



Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam

By Indira Falk Gesink

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The famed reform debates at al-Azhar Madrasa in nineteenth-century Cairo – one of the most influential centers of religious study in Sunni Islam – were enormously influential for twentieth-century Islamic thought. In this book Indira Gesink argues that narratives of these debates overemphasize the roles of famous modernists like Muhammad 'Abduh, obscuring important themes. By restoring conservative voices to the debate, she shows that conservative 'ulama engaged many of the same issues as reformers and led committees that generated and implemented reforms; ultimately, conservative leaders at al-Azhar provided crucial legitimacy for the reforms to become rooted in public life. Drawing on obscure, but important, archival sources to illustrate the important contributions of conservative scholars to the evaluation of twentieth-century Sunni Islam, Islamic Reform and Conservatism is indispensable for all those interested in the modern Middle East, religious history, secularism, modernism and religious reform.

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- Sales Rank: #3428126 in Books
- Published on: 2013-06-30
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.57" h x .95" w x 5.40" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

'Indira Gesink's deeply researched study on al-Azhar reform sheds new light on a major chapter in the history of modern Islam. Dispensing with conventional portrayals of entrenched conservatives resisting enlightened modernists, Gesink reveals a far more nuanced and complicated set of intellectual and political struggles over al-Azhar's organization, curriculum and administration. The revisionist account of Muhammad Abduh's character and career is particularly compelling. Gesink rescues the reputations of conservative sheikhs from the slanted perspective that Orientalists uncritically adopted. In addition, she vividly illustrates the overlapping influences on al-Azhar of the Muhammad Ali dynasty, British colonial authorities, eminent sheikhs and rowdy religious pupils. Al-Azhar's present influence in Egypt and the Muslim world owes much to this chapter in its history. Gesink's book most certainly deserves the attention of readers interested in modern Islamic institutions and thought along with specialists on Egypt.' – David Commins, Professor of History, Dickinson College; author of *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (I.B.Tauris 2006)

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