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While a response along these lines is not totally implausible, there are reasons to believe that Roberts has more comprehensive reforms for the study of religion in mind. For, the problem with social-scientific and naturalistic explanations, ultimately, isn't just that they can't explain everything—or, in Robert's words, that they are "inadequate" (15)—but that they try to explain anything. For, according to Roberts, religion isn't so much about—and so scholars shouldn't focus on—"social formation," (10) or even an individual's particular contribution to the multilayered process that is "meaning-making" (71). Rather, "Religion is about what is always slipping away," to quote Mark Taylor's words, which are featured on the very first page of *Encountering Religion*. Endorsing Taylor's ontological claims about the indeterminacy of meaning but transposing them into the epistemological register, Roberts speaks of the ineffectuality of our cognitive powers to *determine* meaning: "religion has something to teach us about the impossibility of grasping" (4). Taken together, such remarks force the conclusion that Roberts's answer to "modernist positivism" (49) isn't an emergent humanism, but, rather, an all-too-familiar skepticism.

My goal here is not to deny the justice of Roberts's claims in defense of the humanistic enterprise, generally, or the relevance of that enterprise to the study of religion, in particular. About that, I could hardly be more sympathetic. But that enterprise is better defended, I think, when we commit to giving a theoretical account of the cognitive status of the claims made in that context, that is, of the cognitive status of criticism and interpretation, not by demoting the modes of understanding and explanation made uniquely available by natural and social scientists. Why rule out, a priori, that mutual illumination might be found as humanists, social scientists, and natural scientists seek each other out to define, redefine, and expand their respective explanatory competencies? Surely, something like this explains the rapprochement between Cavell, upon whom Roberts lavishes nearly unconditional praise, and Thomas Kuhn. Neither thinker found positivism convincing or skepticism comforting. And while it's certainly true that Cavell dramatizes the truth in skepticism, skepticism is not, for him, as it is, evidently, for Roberts and Taylor, *the* truth. Indeed, as I read Cavell, the desire to regard one's own, or another's meanings, as impossible to grasp, as "always slipping away," marks an epistemic, moral, aesthetic, and even religious failure. Scholars of religion drawing inspiration from Cavell's thought might arrive at conclusions opposite to those defended in *Engaging Religion*. To provoke work in that direction, let me conclude with these words from Cavell: "Nothing we can know or need to know is unknown" (*Must We Mean What We Say?* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969], 318).

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HOFFMAN, VALERIE. *The Essentials of Ibādī Islam*. Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012. xii + 344 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

Interpreting the Qur'ān is one of the most difficult tasks in the study of Islamic history both because of its importance in justifying historical events and the conflicting ways it has been interpreted to justify those events. Academic scholars of Islam are frequently tasked with wading through the highly contested field of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in an attempt to clearly describe historical events. Valerie Hoffman's *The Essentials of Ibādī Islam* provides, in a readily accessible manner, a useful example of contextualizing Qur'ānic exegesis. Recognizing how little is known about the Ibādīs, Hoffman provides a condensed treatment of Islamic theology that intentionally provides context for novices to the field (4). For example,

Hoffman situates the Ibādīs relative to their theological interlocutors: “The Ibadi perspective on the early caliphate differs from that of both Sunnis and Shi’a. From their point of view, the only legitimate way to come to power is not through familial or tribal affiliation or through divine selection, but through selection by the leading men of the Muslim community” (7).

Hoffman also offers clear descriptions of the *Kharijites*, the sect from which the Ibādīs emerged: “As we have seen, the questions that led to the formation of the Kharijite sect were the status of gravely sinning Muslims and the definition of the Muslim community and its leadership. Ibadi doctrine on these pivotal issues was several centuries in the making, during which Ibadis debated many issues among themselves . . . beginning in the first half of the second/eighth century” (18). These types of comments provide clear theological and historical perspective for those interested in Islamic theology in general and the Ibādīs in particular. In addition, Hoffman provides a glossary and biographical dictionary that assists with historical and semantic proficiency in a field of study that frequently weaves difficult theological concepts with highly contested linguistic, historical, and biographical *pedadillos*.

Through these introductory and concluding features, Hoffman creates something of a primer on early Islamic theology that is centered on the Ibādī expression of Islam. For example, Hoffman provides a useful comparison for academic scholars of Christ: “Just as the question was raised whether Christ had two natures (divine and human), so was the question raised whether the Qur’an had two natures (eternal and created)” (39). There are inherent difficulties with providing such direct comparison between these two complex and historically contested issues, but in an intentionally introductory work, this type of comparison has its merits.

All of this contextualization is intended to provide entrée to Hoffman’s critical translation of *al-‘Aqida ‘l-Wahbiyya* (translated as *The Wahbi Creed*) by Nāṣir b. Sālim b. ‘Udayyam al-Rawāḥi (Abū Muslim al-Bahlānī; 1860–1920). Al-Rawāḥi penned *The Wahbi Creed* as a primer for Ibādī students that could be substantially memorized and used as a response to theological critics of Ibādī Islam (47). *The Wahbi Creed* takes the form of question and response between a (fictitious) student and al-Rawāḥi that navigates the complexities of Islamic theology. The student begins by stating his trust in al-Rawāḥi and inquiring about the value of pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Al-Rawāḥi responds by leading the student to understand that the subject par excellence that is pursued for its own sake is theology (57). *The Wahbi Creed* is organized according to common topics in the study of Islamic theology such as God’s unity and God’s attributes, as well as topics that are of particular importance to Ibādīs such as the possibility of seeing God in the afterlife and the necessity of dissociating from nonbelievers.

The difficulties of Qur’anic exegesis are of central importance in *The Wahbi Creed*. Al-Rawāḥi provides an important example of how Ibādī interpretations of the Qur’an differ from other expressions of Islam by declaring that it is impossible to see God in the afterlife: “We say: The people . . . employed textual proofs . . . for this teaching of theirs [that it is possible to see God], such as the words of the Most High, ‘On the day faces will be radiant (*wujuh yawma’idhin nadira*), looking at/to their Lord (*ila rabbiha nazira*)’ (75:22–23). They have no proof in this verse, as you will know. Know that the words of the Most High, ‘to their Lord’ (*ila rabbiha*) are (an adverbial clause) describing His word ‘looking’ (*nazira*); in this case, the adverbial clause . . . is placed first in order to attract attention (to it) and keep it from disjunction (*jal-fasila*) (from the action it describes)” (112–13).

At stake is whether one ought to believe the Qur’an when it announces that radiant faces will observe their Lord. For al-Rawāḥi, there are linguistic, logical, and theological restrictions on that phrase that make physical observation of God

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impossible: “the best exegetical method . . . is that any deletion or metaphorical interpretation, even if it contradicts the original text, is better than the alternative, if the alternative leads to anthropomorphism or to anything else that contradicts the perfection of God and the qualities of His majesty” (114). In the midst of a significantly thorny issue, al-Rawāḥi declares that it is better to contradict the Qur’ān than to commit the sin of anthropomorphism (35). Hoffman’s translation and contextualization of this text provides academic scholars with a platform from which to describe these important theoretical moments without imputing their validity. Hoffman’s framework allows readers of *The Wahbi Creed* to analyze without moralizing; to understand without ignoring ambiguity.

Qur’ānic exegesis is a highly contested arena that can tempt academic scholars of theology to engage in identifying correct or appropriate theories. Hoffman deftly navigates this difficult arena by providing a sufficient number of examples that educate the reader on Islamic theology in general and Ibāḍī theology in particular. Rather than adjudicating any position, Hoffman uses her introduction to broadly sketch the issues at stake and provides ample transliteration in her translation of *The Wahbi Creed* to ensure that competing meanings, internal inconsistencies, and obscure passages retain their ambiguity. Hoffman provides a useful example of how academic scholars can wade into the fields of Qur’ānic exegesis and theology without glossing over inherent inconsistencies that might unduly privilege one actor over another.

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DATLA, KAVITA SARASWATHI. *The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013. vii+234 pp. \$49.00 (cloth).

The phrase “secular Islam” may appear at first like an oxymoron, but a deeper analysis reveals otherwise. Traditionally, a vast body of scholarship from the fields of religious and theological studies, history, political science, and anthropology has tended to privilege the modern, Eurocentric category of religion when it comes to Islam and Muslims. According to this perspective, Islam and Muslims are at times seen as interchangeable and are viewed as fundamentally opposed to the world of the secular. Within the fields of religious and theological studies, analyses tend mostly to focus upon scriptural texts or classical jurisprudence and law, overlooking wider cultural, institutional, and political contexts, and even, at times, drawing teleological lines about Muslim thought from the eighth century to the present. Relatedly, a primary concern has tended to be about whether or not Islam is compatible with modernity.

It is only very recently that a small, but growing body of scholarship—influenced in part by interventions of such scholars as Talal Asad—have begun to challenge long-held assumptions about the relationship between Islam and secularism by turning to the historical transformations of both the meanings and processes of secularization (*Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993]).

Kavita Datla’s comprehensively researched historical study participates in a burgeoning conversation about the historical processes of secularization within Islam, with a particular focus on the role of Urdu-speaking Muslim intellectuals of Hyderabad from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. Datla “attends to the ways that [they] sought to secularize and therefore radically reformulate their own linguistic, historical, religious, and literary traditions” by turning specif-