

Marsden, Peter. *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The Taliban is best suited for readers who know something, but not "too much," about Afghanistan. Written by an author with practical experience of the region, the book is clearly intended for a general rather than an academic audience. Peter Marsden has "a degree" in modern Arabic, worked for "a number of years" as a "Middle East specialist," before undertaking further "training" in "community development" and "spent" fifteen years in "poverty and health programs in the UK," before moving "into the overseas aid field."

The book has several merits. For one thing, it offers valuable glimpses of cultural-organizational daily life in Afghanistan. The author perceptively notes, for example, that: "Before the war, it was the norm for government officials to be lavishly entertained and to be virtually imprisoned as guests in order to minimize the amount of information they could obtain for the purposes of taxation. Suspicions are rife and the rumor-mill is powerful." (p. 12)

Chapters 11 and 12 are the book's best, and they offer good analytical arguments to explain some of the complexities of Afghanistan under the Taliban. Marsden is clearly knowledgeable about the local culture and about the general features of Islamic law, and he puts them to good use in these chapters. He offers a good account of the cultural configuration of Taliban political and social support, and puts the Taliban movement in perspective, one that includes various positions within the Islamic world as well as those in the West. His analysis of how the Western world's negative stereotyping of Islam has not only led to a self-fulfilling prophecy - he does not actually mention the concept, but that is what he means - but has also "provoked negative stereotyping of the West by the radical Islamic movements" is superb. (p. 60) So is his account of the clear implications of Pakistani, Saudi Arabian and American support for the Taliban, including "USA's possible interest in promoting the Taliban," and how "it sowed the seeds for the emergence of the Taliban." (pp. 142-46)

The Taliban's author demonstrates how fragmentation has destroyed the Afghan society. Durkheim showed us long ago how fragmentation within a group leaves the members vulnerable to the ultimate self-destructive behavior, suicide. Now, Marsden clearly makes a case for the Afghan society as a whole.

Marsden makes a convincing case when he points out that "a proportion of the young people who have joined the Taliban were schooled in the educational establishments set up by the Islamist parties." (p. 84) These are the same parties that are fighting the *Taliban* for the control of Afghanistan. Thus, the parties' schools, refugee camps and orphanages, financed and organized with the help of the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, were, in a way, breeding grounds for later Taliban fighters.

The author also eloquently describes the difficulties governments and international agencies face in dealing with organizations such as Taliban:

It has often seemed that with every apparent move forward, there has been a negative incident that has seriously soured international attitudes. The problem is not unique to Afghanistan, but it is one that has to be addressed.

The problem is that Marsden never goes far enough in addressing it.

Taliban's major flaw is its attempt to do too much. Thus, the entire history of Afghanistan, up to the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, is covered in 15 pages. Marsden also tries to draw comparisons between the Afghan example and four other Islamic movements in even less space. This cannot be done and inevitably leads to inaccuracies, like this last sentence of a short paragraph trying to explain the Iranian revolution of 1979: "Some of the ulama then called for a jihad against what they regarded as the un-Islamic government of the Shah." (p. 75) The fact is that the ulama never called for a jihad in the Iranian revolution. In a comparison he also makes between the Taliban and one of the four other Islamic movements, he says: "Both mobilized men to martyr themselves with the aim of conquering a country . . . Both also insisted that their interpretation of Islam was the only correct one." (p. 73) Unfortunately, this quick characterization avoids the question of "how do movements non-Islamic as well Islamic mobilize men to conquer a country?" Indeed, what movement does not insist on its own interpretation being the correct one? Another embarrassing example is his referring to Nadir Shah (a post-Safavid king), on more than one occasion, as a "Safavid ruler."

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