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BOOK REVIEW: A SELF STUDY COURSE ON POLITICAL ISLAM. LEVEL 1

Tomáš Beňuška*

WARNER, B.: *Samoštudijný kurz politického islamu. Úroveň 1. [A Self Study Course on Political Islam. Level 1]*. Brno: CSPI International, 2018, 114 s. ISBN 978-80-88089-39-1.

Dr. Bill Warner, real name **Bill French**, is an American writer specializing in political Islam. He is the founder of the *Center for the Study of Political Islam* (CSPI), which is a non-profit organisation with a goal to educate people in the field of political Islam in a very simplistic way, so that not only scholars, but basically anybody could understand. His work is constructed to resemble a form of a course – the lot of 15 books he has written so far is divided into three different levels of the course, intended to familiarize the reader with the basic understanding of the Islamic holy texts, while the fourth level consists of The Trilogy (The Quran, The Hadith and The Sira) itself and the original book on *Sharia law*.

It is said that **Bill Warner** studies religion his entire life, professionally analyses Islam for decades and that he is a prime expert on Islam in the US. It is, however, fairly important to state that **Bill Warner** has a doctorate degree from physics and mathematics, not any political science, nor religion. He is not formally educated in this area, so there is practically none qualification behind his research and one could say that his output is that of a layman. That in itself would not constitute a problem; it is important, however, for readers to understand that **Bill Warner** is not any bona fide authority on the matter and basically anybody with the right amount of time and funding could do what he does.

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Now, I intended to familiarize with his work for a quite some time, so I've read two books right away and I can say that the currently presented review of „Self-Study Course on Political Islam – Level 1“ can be well applied to the second level as well (*Sharia Law for non-Muslims*).

„Self-Study Course on Political Islam – Level 1“ is a book to start with, when you are beginning to read **Bill Warner** and – according to him – when you are trying to understand political Islam. The contents of this quite short book are focused on the very basics of political aspects of the Islamic faith. He puts a lot of emphasis on the fact, that his research is not about religion or Muslims, be it extremists or not, but about Islamic political doctrine and the history. Content wise, it consists of 13 chapters (or as the author calls them, lessons), which are all focused on one single topic, such as relation of Islam towards Jews, women, or slavery, or an analysis of themes like Jihad or ethics of Islam. Every chapter is approximately 8 pages long, which goes hand in hand with the general idea of simplicity on which is the whole work of **Bill Warner** based, as I have mentioned before. When a certain topic is closed within circa 8 pages, it is really easy for the reader to comprehend, although on the expense of quality, since you cannot possibly manage to do an in-depth analysis of any topic in such condensed way. It is plausible, however, that particular details of presented topics are further elaborated in the other volumes from the higher course levels.

The goal of this book is very transparent – to be easily understood by anyone. In this case, the book really serves its purpose, although I am not entirely sure it is necessarily a good thing. When reading, on every page you get the notion that the author wants to suggest something. In fact, the book is really very suggestive, and you can see an example of it on basically any page. For example, in lesson 3 called *Basics*, on the page 25 in the beginning it says: „*The most important fact about Islam is, that it is mostly a political ideology. Religion plays only a secondary role in it.*“ There is not really a context to this as it starts the paragraph and it is a too brave of a statement to be left alone without any viable explanation. Or in the very beginning, in the *Introduction* chapter of this book is a subchapter about kafirs, on the page 10 and it starts with: „*The word kafir is usually translated as a ‚non-believer‘, but this translation is incorrect. The word non-believer is semantically and emotionally neutral, whereas kafir is in every aspect an insulting, biased and hateful word. The Quran speaks, that you can lie to kafir, conspire against him, hate him, enslave him, make fun of him, torture him or even kill him.*“ There is no reference on the semantic subtext of the word kafir, no source, no elaboration. It is basically a statement.

It is said numerous times, that **Bill Warner** uses mathematical methodology to analyse political Islam. I think this is interpreted as such just to give credit to **Warner's** formal education, which is otherwise irrelevant to this field, because the only trace of „mathematical methodology“ I noticed was a diagram at the beginning of the book, which shows a proportion of the content of Quran, Hadith and Sira that is devoted to kafirs. When it comes to the used methodology, it is my understanding that **B. Warner** goes for an analytical, synthetic and mostly inductive approach, but achieves peculiar conclusions. For instance, in the aforementioned lesson 3 he writes: *„The first pillar (of Islam) says that there is no other god than Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. If you say this in Arabic in front of other Muslims, you have become a Muslim. It is the most focal point of Islam, acknowledgment of Quran and Sunna (Muhammad's perfect example). Allah alone doesn't make you a Muslim. To become a Muslim you have to accept Muhammad as a prophet and a perfect paragon“*. Later into the lesson he writes: *„Kafirs go to hell after they die, but not because they committed some sort of a crime as a theft or a murder, but simply because they didn't believe in Muhammad as Allah's prophet. So hell is a political prison for Muhammad's opponents“*. Basically, he is stating that because you have to mention Muhammad in the „becoming“, his role is at least as important as Allah's, if not more, since apparently you are a kafir when you don't accept him as a prophet, regardless of your stance to Allah. According to **B. Warner**, Allah is a face of the religious side of Islam, which is not his subject matter as he states in the beginning, whereas Muhammad is the face of the political side of Islam, which **B. Warner** criticizes. The word kafir is a political term, because as he says, it has a negative connotation, so if the understanding is that hell is for kafirs, then he combines the two political sides of two different coins, creates a new one and concludes, that: *„hell is a political prison for Muhammad's opponents.“* This is a just an example of **Warner's** broken inductive method throughout the whole book.

Furthermore, he is constantly criticising dualism of political Islam, a concept, in which the Muslims have two different views on the same matter, based on whether they speak to other Muslims or to non-believers. For example, they cannot hurt another Muslim in any way, but they can do anything to a kafir. Or, when speaking to a kafir, the women are protected and valued, but among Muslims, it is absolutely acceptable to beat them. So, he shuns Islamic dualism, yet he himself is dualistic. At one point, he accuses Islam of a violent Islamisation and then he openly advocates Christian crusades. In lesson 6

called *Christians*, on the page 48 he writes: „Yes, there were mistakes done during the crusades, but generally they were a great good. And why were they a great good? It was one of a few cases when Christians in Europe actually reacted to an intensive suffering of Christians in the Middle East. The reasons why crusades began were very simple. They came as a reaction to a call for help. And why did these Christians call for help? Because they were murdered, robbed and taxed to death by their Muslim rulers. And how did these Muslims become their rulers? Originally was this part of the world mostly Christian. It didn't become Muslim because some imams came and started preaching at the marketplace. No. It became Islamic with the use of the sword”. This is highly misleading. They were fighting Muslims because of their conquest of the Holy Land, but the campaigns were extended to bring Christianity even to pagans, or basically to any other kind of non-Christians which is, essentially, the same premise as with the Muslims. Consequently, the major problem with this text is that it is one-sided, and the interpretation suits the needs of the wanted result – which is to dislike political Islam.

A bit peculiar is also the constant repetition of the same facts. It could be, perhaps, that it is due to the educative basis of this whole effort of the author, but in the first 40 pages of the book, there is mentioned at least three times that Jihad cost 270 million of lives of kafirs in 1400 years. Also, in the other book of **Bill Warner** which I've read is a lesson on „Submission and Dualism” as well, fashioned basically in the same way as in this one. After a while of reading, the reader starts to wonder, what is the meaning behind the pointing out of the same facts over and over as if the author wanted to persuade the reader about something. Also, if the author aspires to create any form of serious scientific material, I do not think that sarcastic remarks are really appropriate, such as on the page 76, where the author writes on ethics: „Jihad is terror. So, when the Muslim scholars say that terror has nothing to do with Islam, they practice lying. Using lies against kafirs has actually a specific name in Arabic – *takiya*. It means a sacred lying. The sole fact that somebody has a term for a sacred lying is an amazing ethical idea”. This sentence ends a paragraph.

The problem with „Self-Study Course on Political Islam – Level 1” is that it has a too transparent and one-sided interpretation. Topics like these thrive on interpretation and the one **B. Warner** uses is evidently anti-Islamic. He does not make up any information, the facts that he states are true (I have looked up some of the most controversial), he does not lie, it is the way he writes about them. The reader does not need to be a scholar or an expert in the field to see

what opinion **B. Warner** has on the matter and I think that this should not be that transparent, because it is on the expense of quality. It could be even dangerous, considering that the goal of the *Center for the Study of Political Islam* is to educate in a very simplistic way in order for everybody to understand, since it is sometimes, I daresay, borderline manipulative. Thus, based on the two books I have read from **Bill Warner**, I would not consider his publications to be a scientific material.