

Book Review

Is there a connection between the Islamic past and present?

By Muhammad Mojum Khan

Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction, by Adam J. Silverstein, New York: Oxford University Press, pp157, 2010, PB, £7.99.

Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam was born in history. We know more about Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) than we do about Moses or Jesus (peace be on them). According to the Islamic tradition, Adam was not only the first Prophet but also the first Muslim and that is why all classical Muslim historians began their chronicles with the beginning of creation, covering the careers of all the prominent Prophets and Messengers, often concluding in their own lifetime (915 CE in the case of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari). Islamic history, according to the early Muslim chroniclers, did not begin with the Prophet of Islam; it began with the creation of time. For this reason, they pursued a universalistic and inclusive approach to the study of history.

In the words of late Alija Ali Izetbegovic, the Bosnian President and philosopher, “There are two histories of Islam: the one preceding and the one following Muhammad, upon whom be peace. The latter one, the history of Islam in the narrower sense, cannot be fully understood if one has insufficient knowledge of the former, particularly of the period which covers Judaism and Christianity. These three religions have played a major role in human history. Through them, man has become the axis of history and has learned to perceive humanity as a whole. Through them, he has known the meaning of external and internal life, external and internal progress, their mutual relations and their limits. The historical successes and failures of both Judaism

and Christianity have culminated in a decisive Islamic experience of mankind. Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are thus the personifications of three primeval possibilities of all that is human.” (*Islam Between East and West*, reprinted 1999, p187)

The universal and inclusive approach to human history as pursued by the early Muslims was in reality inspired by the Qur'an, for it is much more than a Divine revelation and guide. It also provides a powerful and integrative assessment and evaluation of the progress of time in the light of Divine knowledge, wisdom and judgement. If that was not the case, why would a quarter of the Qur'an consist of historical data and information about Prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Jonah, John the Baptist and Jesus, among others? These facts are related in the Divine revelation to inform us who we are, where we are and where we need to be. The Qur'an therefore is the most powerful and pertinent commentary we have on the progress of time. In the book under review, Adam Silverstein is right to say that “Perhaps it is the history that is important to Muslims – if we were to ask a pre-modern Muslim to define the limits of Islamic history he would likely be puzzled by the suggestion that it has temporal or spatial limits at all... Islamic history is the product of people and their actions. But people in the pre-modern world were the product of their environment. They could not ignore the natural backdrop against which the events of Islamic history unfolded and nor can we.” (pp1 and 3)

The author is a lecturer in Islamic history at Oxford University and Fellow of Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. In this book he seeks to account for the sudden rise and expansion of Islam, both in the East and the West, tracing the history of this global faith from the seventh to the twenty-first century. According to the author, we need to study and understand Islam and especially Islamic history in order to make sense of the difficulties and challenges we face today. In his own words, “In recent years it has become increasingly obvious to non-Muslim Westerners that Islam matters. Whether or not this is a good thing continues to occupy a central place in public debates and in the media. On the basis of some of their recent statements, Prince Charles appears to be a fan; Pope Benedict XVI – not so much. The growing visibility of Muslims in newspaper headlines and on the streets of European and North American cities has raised important issues concerning integration, multiculturalism, interfaith relations, and even what it means to be ‘British’, ‘American’, or ‘Western’ altogether..... Regardless of one’s opinion on these matters,

it is clear to many that there is a conflict brewing between ‘Islam’ and the Judeo-Christian culture upon which Western civilization is thought to be based.” (p.xv)

If that is the case, then the author argues we need to turn to the Islamic past to find answers to these new and emerging challenges. Clearly influenced by the so-called ‘clash of civilisations’ theory first formulated by Bernard Lewis and later popularised by Samuel Huntington, the author is of the opinion that the roots of present ‘Muslim rage’ actually lies in the Islamic past. Otherwise, he contends, “How then are we to explain the enormous cultural gulf that appears to separate Judeo-Christian, Western societies from Muslim one? To answer this question we must turn to Islamic history. The role that Islamic history plays in modern Muslim societies is extremely important, though it is often overlooked since it has no equivalent in the modern West. For this reason, understanding the rise and subsequent development of Islam may enable us to interpret modern Muslim societies and understand their relation to – and relationship with – Western ones.” (pp.xv-xvi) Though it is true that the Islamic past is very important to the Muslims (just as the Jewish and Christian pasts are important to them), but the author’s attempt to explore and explain the Muslim present solely in relation to the Islamic past, unsurprisingly, leads him to conclude that today ‘Islam matters’ because ‘Islamic history matters’ as much, if not more (see pages 138-9).

However, such a conclusion is problematic (if not erroneous) for a number of reasons. Philosophically speaking, we must avoid confusing the absoluteness of the ideal with the relativity of our existential reality otherwise we will fail to understand the relationship between the ideal, the actor and his action in the context of the Islamic worldview. Secondly, given the huge diversity of Islam as a faith, culture and civilisation it is unfair and equally unacceptable to trace the roots of our contemporary political challenges to the Islamic past when, in fact, these problems are the fruits of, in the words of the renowned philosopher, Charles Taylor, ‘a secular age’ than that of Islamic history or culture – seeing that the Muslims, too, have been the victims of this ‘unholy rage’. In addition, Silverstein’s analysis of Muslim past is misleading because his approach assumes that somehow Islam and the West are locked in a cosmic ‘clash’ and therefore they are politically and culturally inherently incompatible. Not surprisingly, the idea that Muslims, Jews and Christians had actually lived together

and thrived in a multi-faith and multicultural *al-Andalus* (Islamic Spain) is, in his opinion, a myth which had been fabricated for political ends (see pages 129-131). Consisting of seven short chapters, an Introduction and Conclusion, the author of this book has been heavily influenced by the speculative, out-of-date and academically discredited theories formulated by Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, among others, concerning the origins of Islam, its Prophet and scriptural sources (see chapter 4 in particular). In other words, while I agree with the author that Islamic history is a very important subject and therefore both Muslims and non-Muslims need to study it more closely in order to understand the relationship between the Islamic past and present, I cannot agree with his simplistic and selective approach to the subject.

Moreover, I came across numerous factual inaccuracies. For example, on page 72 the author says that “*jihad* literally means ‘striving against another’. Actually the Arabic word *jihad* literally means to exert or make an effort; this could be either physical or spiritual effort made individually or collectively for the benefit of humanity. Also, Alexander the Great is not considered to be a Prophet by the Muslims (p1); in fact, the Qur’anic commentators disagree concerning the identity of Zul-Qarnain as mentioned in *Surah Kahf*, verse 83. Likewise, referring to my book, *The Muslim 100*, the author wrote that “...a recent book on the 100 ‘most influential Muslims in history’ includes only one Western Muslim – Malcolm X...” (p134). This is not true. My book includes more than half a dozen Western Muslims including Abd al-Rahman III (medieval ruler), Ibn Rushd (medieval philosopher), Abul Qasim al-Zahrawi (famous physician), Ibn al-Arabi (great mystical philosopher), Ibn Hazm (renowned Islamic scholar and writer), Ibn Tufayl (world-famous philosopher and novelist) and of course Muhammad Ali (the great American boxer and arguably the most famous sportsman in modern history).

These errors aside, I enjoyed reading this book, not least because it focuses on Islamic history as a discipline in its own right although it is not the first book on an Islamic subject in the Oxford University Press’s *A Very Short Introduction* series, which, I hasten to add, represents nothing short of a landmark in contemporary publishing, having already printed more than two hundred titles on a wide-range of subjects. The

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two previous related volumes are titled *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* and *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*.

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