

Book Review

Western admirers of the Prophet of Islam

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

About Muhammad: The Other Western Perspective on the Prophet of Islam, edited with an Introduction by Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Surrey: Legacy Publishing, pp107, 2010, HB, £12.99

The rise of Islam in the seventh century Arabia changed the course of human history – politically, economically and culturally. Inspired by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the tribes of Arabia became united for the first time in their history under the banner of Islam, thus carving out an empire which extended from Spain in the West to the Indus Valley in the East. As expected, the rapid expansion of the new Arab empire as well as Islam, the religion of this extraordinary empire, evoked considerable fear, worry and hostility in the hearts and minds of many non-Arabs especially the people of Western Christendom who felt that the new Muslim faith and its expanding empire posed a great threat to their existence.

Such fear and hostility was reinforced by the “Arab control of what we call the Middle East and their naval command of the Mediterranean [which] imposed a blockade on Europe, which destroyed the commercial and urban society left behind by the Romans. During five centuries, from the seventh to the twelfth, Europe was deprived of all overseas commerce by the long Arab barrier extending from the Atlantic to Central Asia north of Tibet...Europe, shut off from the rest of the world, was obliged to become self-supporting, and produced only its own food and home-made clothing...Throughout these five hundred years, Christendom lived in constant fear of Muslim conquest...throughout the Renaissance period in Europe, fear of the Muslims was still strong and hostility, political and commercial as well as religious, was intense. Doubtless as a result of these factors, the indebtedness of Western Christendom to Arab civilization was systematically played down, if not completely denied. A tradition was built up, by censorship and propaganda, that the Muslim imperialists had been mere barbarians and that the rebirth of learning in the West was derived directly from Roman and Greek sources alone, without any Arab intervention.” (Sir John B Glubb, *A Short History of the Arab Peoples*, 1978, pp288-289)

The demonisation, censorship and propaganda peddled in medieval and modern Europe was, as expected, aimed primary at the Prophet of Islam. “The demonization

of the prophet... was to become the very instrument of the making of Christian Europe. Psychologically and physically Islam was regarded as Christianity's worst enemy, threatening Christian identity and its very sense of superiority. The Crusades, which extended from 1095 to 1207, were only one expression of this great Christian resurgence." (Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe*, 2000, pp73-74) If the Crusades represented Western Europe's desperate political and military response to the Islamic threat, then its intellectual and literary propaganda against the Muslim faith was no less venomous in its tone and content. Not surprisingly, books like *Mahomet Unmasked. Or a Discoverie of the manifold Forgeries, Falsehoods, and Impieties of the Blasphemous Seducer Mahomet* by William Bedwell (1563-1632) and *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* by Humphrey Prideaux (1648-1724) became popular works on the life of the Prophet of Islam at the time.

Although the authors of these intensely polemical works were ill-informed and misguided, however it would be unfair and equally inaccurate to suggest that the European perception and interpretation of Islam and its Prophet was entirely biased and one-dimensional; on the contrary, the brave and relatively sympathetic views of scholars like Henry Stubbe (1632-1676), Godfrey Higgins (1771-1833) and John Davenport (1789-1877), among others, should not be overlooked. The full title of Stubbe's book was *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism with the Life of Mahomet and a Vindication of Him and His Religion from the Calumnies of the Christians*, while Higgins's *Apology for Mohamed* was published in 1829. Four decades later, Davenport's *Apology for Mohammed and the Koran* was published privately in London. The authors of these books tried to repudiate medieval European attacks on Islam on the one hand and develop a more sympathetic and accurate picture of the Arabian Prophet and his message on the other.

In the book under review, the editor has collected excerpts from the works of twelve Western writers, focusing primarily on the life and teachings of the Prophet of Islam. Although this short anthology of Western writings on the Prophet only covers the period from the eighteenth century to the present, for some unknown reason, it does not include or even mention the works of scholars like Higgins and Davenport. Apart from the contributions of George Sale (eighteenth century), Thomas Carlyle (nineteenth century), Alphonse de Lamartine (nineteenth century), Bayard Taylor (nineteenth century) and Tor Andrae (early twentieth century), all the remaining excerpts have been taken from the works of contemporary scholars and writers like W M Watt, P K Hitti, John Esposito, Annemarie Schimmel, Clinton Bennett, Barnaby Rogerson and Karen Armstrong (I should point out that the writings of these contemporary authors are readily available unlike the works of the earlier writers). Also, for some unknown reason, the editor has included an excerpt from Philip K Hitti's *History of the Arabs* even though he is not a Westerner by origin; he hailed from an Arab Maronite (Christian) family in Lebanon. By contrast, the important and equally sympathetic contributions of eminent Westerners like Sir John Bagot Glubb (*The Life and Times of Muhammad* and *The Great Arab Conquests*), Sir H A R Gibb (*Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey*), Sir T W Arnold (*The Preaching of Islam*), Alfred Guillaume (*Islam*) and R V C Bodley (*The Messenger: The Life of Mohammed*), among others, are not even mentioned.

Inclusion of excerpts from the works of the above Western scholars and writers would have certainly enriched this anthology, thus making it an indispensable source of

reference. For example, in the Introduction to his biography of the Prophet, R V C Bodley wrote, “While we have no contemporary records of Moses or Confucius or Buddha, while we know some fragments *of a fragment* of Christ’s life, but nothing of the thirty years which prepared the way for the culminating three, the story of Mohammed is extremely clear. Here, instead of the shadowy and the mysterious, we have history. We know as much of Mohammed as we do of men who lived much closer to our epoch. His external record, his youth, his relatives, his habits are neither legendary nor hearsay. His internal record, after his mission had been proclaimed, is no hazy tradition of some obscure or perplexed preacher. We have a contemporaneous book, absolutely unique in its origin and in its preservation, on the authenticity of which no one ever been able to cast a serious doubt. This book, known as the Koran, is available today as it was first written under Mohammed’s supervision.” (*The Messenger: The Life of Mohammed*, 1946, pp1-2)

Likewise, referring to the life of the Prophet of Islam, Professor Alfred Guillaume wrote, “At the outset let it be said that Muhammad was one of the great figures of history whose overmastering conviction was that there was one God alone and that there should be one community of believers. His ability as a statesman faced with problems of extraordinary complexity is truly amazing. With all the power of armies, police, and civil service no Arab has ever succeeded in holding his countrymen together as he did. If it is objected that the Muslim territory and population at his death was vastly less than that of the empire of the Caliphs, it may be replied that all the elements of disunion were present in his lifetime but dared not show themselves until his death became known.” (*Islam*, 1956, p23) The inclusion of such sympathetic and scholarly contributions would have clearly enhanced the value of this volume and made it more representative.

Nevertheless, this short anthology of Western writings on the Prophet of Islam is a useful addition to the literature on the subject. By compiling this anthology, the editor hoped to “... further the dialogue between the adherents of Islam and other faiths by showing Muslims that not all Westerners harbour implacable hostility to Islam, and by offering others a different perspective on the life of the man who is still the “most talked-of person in the whole range of human history,” as one author recently put it.” (pp. xviii-xix) If this anthology is reprinted in the future, I would recommend that the publishers include short biographical sketches of all the twelve contributors which will enable the readers to understand the historical significance and context of each entry. All in all, the editor deserves credit for his efforts and contribution.

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