
J.J. Saunders (1910-72) is widely known to the students of Islamic history as the author of the History of Medieval Islam (1965). He taught history at the University of Canterbury for more than 22 years. The present publication is a memorial tribute of the University to the distinguished scholar. The collection consists of Saunders’s five essays on different aspects of history of Asia in medieval period.

The width of the range and scope of the essays included in this selection must have posed a real problem in choosing an appropriate title for the book. The juxtaposition in selection is therefore conspicuously reflected in the title. The focus of the author’s attention is on the Central Asian region where Mongols, Muslims and Christians have played significant part in the making of the history of this area. This region has interested many historians and it continues to attract scholar’s attention today. From the chronology of his publications one may see that Saunders’ interest in this region and in the history of Islam originated from his study of the Crusades (1962). In 1965 he published an article on Mongols as well as his book on the history of Islam. He presented a research paper on Mongols at the 27th International Congress of Orientalists in 1967. In 1971 he published his History of the Mongol Conquests. The essays selected for publication in the present collection preceded his book on the Mongol conquests.

Apparently the publication of these essays which have previously appeared in the well-known academic journals during the period of 1963-9 is justified by the fact that they are now conveniently available in one volume. Another significant contribution of this publication is Saunders’ biographical sketch and a list of his publications.

Saunders writes lucidly and prolifically. Yet, as far as Islamic history is concerned his approach is very general and superficial. His bias is Christian as well as European. He makes very general statements about Islam without taking into account latest researches on the points of discussion. His zeal for generalization which he defines as “to explain what had happened” (p. 20). overflows in his essay on the problem of Islamic Decadence. In this essay Saunders’ attempt to explain Islamic decadence leads him farther into sweeping remarks. For instance, presuming without questioning that the West owes its progress to Christianity, he suggests that a comparison of the origins of two religions might explain their present conditions. As to the intellectual sources of the West, Saunders refers to Greek and Hebrew thought. This is the reason why Christianity progressed along more systematic and rational lines. “Socrates could be at ease in Zion but not in Mecca”. “Classical Greece, with its rationalism... belongs to the West (to Christianity as well?) in a sense in which it does not and never did belong to Islam” (p. 108). On the other hand Islam grew in the sterile heritage of Arabian desert with no intellectual legacy. Hence Islam could not develop a rational attitude towards life as
Christian West did. Instead Islamic thought remained fettered by the authoritarian attitude towards life. He therefore suggests that "only by freeing themselves from the paralyzing grip of the Koran and Law could the Muslim people hope to contribute again to the general advance of civilization". (p. 104)

These generalisations ignore the various rational aspects in Islam manifested in philosophy, jurisprudence, *Tafsir* and *Kalam*. In fact, the edifice of Islamic law rests mainly on the jurists' generous use of reason to incorporate social changes into the legal theories. The causes of Muslim decadence must be sought elsewhere. For instance, in Muslims' attitude of complacency and self-sufficiency at a time when they feared no challenge to their systems. The awareness of weakness of their systems dawned upon them in the Seventeenth Century but by that time they had already begun losing control of their affairs. Another example of generalisation needs no comments. "The prevalence of slavery, sanctioned by the Koran, probably inhibited inventive talent from seeking to devise labour-saving machines". (p. 117)

The book has been very nicely produced. However the transliteration system of Arabic and Persian names and terms is extremely defective, rather it has been conveniently ignored. The editor has also not made the documenting system uniform. Bibliographical information is often inadequate. Had a bibliography been added to the book, it would have saved the reader from going back and forth in search of complete references.

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