BOOK REVIEWS


This book on Islamic history, published in the series “Documentary History of Western Civilization” is composed of extracts translated into English by Professor Bernard Lewis, a member of the Editorial Committee of the Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden ed.), and formerly Head of the Department of Near East History in the University of London. As stated by the author in the Introduction “the theme of this book is the history of Islam from the advent of the Prophet Muhammad to the capture of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed (Muhammad), the Conqueror. It is concerned with a period that extends from the beginning of the seventh century to 1453; with a region that expands from Western Arabia to embrace the Middle East and North Africa, as well as parts of Asia, of tropical Africa, and southern and eastern Europe; with peoples and states which, amid many diversities, shared a common acceptance of the faith and law of Islam and professed to live by them; and finally with the civilization which they created.” (p. xiii).

The first volume deals with politics and war and the second with religion and society. The first chapter entitled “the Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphate” comprises extracts from al-Tabari, Ibn Hisham, Ansāb al-Ashraf of al-Balādhurī, Ibn Qutayba (‘Uyūn al-Akhbār), al-Qalqashandi (Ṣūkh al-A‘shā), Ibn al-Faqih (Kitāb al-Buldān), and al-Mas‘ūdi (Muruř al-Dhahab).

In composing the second chapter which deals with the ‘Abbasids the author has utilized the following sources: Abū‘l Faraj al-İsfahāni (al-Aghānī); al-Tanūkhī (al-Faraj ba‘d al Shiddā), and al-Suli (Akhbār al-Raḍī wa‘l-Muttaqī). How far these sources are representative of the history of the ‘Abbasids should be left to the discretion of the discerning reader to decide.

In compiling a connected narrative from extracts from authoritative and standard works Sir H.M. Elliot in fact stole a march on others when he composed his well-known work “The History of India as told by its own Historians”. This 8-volume history of undivided India has stood the test of time and has held the field almost for a century. Even now when several works which were in manuscript when Sir Henry Elliot embarked on his monumental task have since been published, his “History” still remains an indispensable source for all those who intend to work on Indo-Muslim history. But the present work...
by Bernard Lewis stands no comparison with the "History" by Elliot and Dowson. Its value lies in the fact that it utilizes, apart from chronicles and annalistic accounts, books on religion and sects, politics and economics, philosophy and science, travel, biography and literary works of every kind. Free use has also been made of the administrative literature of the bureaucracy, the geographical literature of the postal service, the juridical literature of the 'Ulama', and "in a different sense, the eulogies and satires of the poets." Of the last mentioned literary genre chapter 15 of Volume ii entitled "Humor" is remarkably representative. The following extract from the Kulliyat of 'Ubayd-i Zakâni will give an idea of what this chapter offers to a student of Islamic-Arabic historical literature.

"A man married a woman, and on the fifth day after the wedding she bore a child. The man went to the market and bought tablets and ink. They asked him, "What is this?" He answered, "A child that can come into the world after five days can go to school after another three." (ii: 284).

Here is yet another sparkling witticism from the same book: Abu'l Haarih was asked, "Can a man of eighty have a child?" He answered them, "Yes, if he has a neighbour of twenty." (ii: 283).

The work under review is preceded by a lengthy introduction, a chronological table and an extensive bibliography of sources. The Introduction, however, contains passages which demand attention. In the second paragraph of the Introduction the learned author says: "It was among the Arabs of the Hijaz that Muhammad was born, lived and died, and in their language that his sacred book was written. (p. xiii). Again he says, "... a great wave of 'Arab conquest and migration carried his faith and his book out of Arabia into the fertile crescent..." (p. xiii). It is really unfortunate that the author in the true spirit of Western Orientalists calls the Qur'an the book of Muhammad instead of the Book of God. He thus commits the same blunder which is so common in the missionary circles of dubbing the Muslim Holy Book as Kalim Muhammad and not calling it the Kalim Allâh. If the missionaries or the padrîs say so, it can be ignored with the contempt it richly deserves but when a learned Arabist and Islamicist says so this must be highly deplored. No doubt a few pages later he observes: The "Qur'an may be called the Muslim scripture; it cannot be called the Muslim Bible. For Muslims it is a single book, in the most literal sense the word of God, dictated to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel." (p. xvi). Here again, though trying to make amends for his earlier lapse, the sting is apparent. He deliberately and purposely avoids the use of the word "revealed" and instead prefers the word "dictated". If God could commune direct with Moses on the Mount of Sinai why could He not communicate His Message direct to the Prophet. In the passage quoted above the author incidentally admits that the Bible is not the word of God; it is the work of men, the disciples of Jesus Christ and even of men of a much later generation. Unlike the Apostles, the real authors of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, the Qur'an was dictated by the Prophet to his amanuenses because he himself did not know how to write. Whatever he recited in the name of God, as revealed to him through the archangel Gabriel or direct in a trance was committed to memory by those present — the Companions — and in their turn transmitted to others quite faithfully and sincerely.
Some scholars, especially those interested in the phenomenology of religion, are prone to equate the Qur'an with the Bible as for instance in the title "La Bible, le Coran et la Science" by M. Bucaille, (Paris 1976). They, however, conveniently forget that while the Muslims claim divine origin for the Qur'an the Christians cannot do so in the case of the Bible. Neither the Jews can make such a claim for the Torah because its text (Hebrew or otherwise) as transmitted to the succeeding generations is both corrupt and apocryphal. To those who doubt its divine origin the Qur'an throws the centuries-old challenge that bring forth even a single sura like those contained in it if you think that it is not the word of God. (x: 39). And then answers it that even if the genii and men-folk get together they would not be able to do so. This bold challenge has stood the test of time and still invites those who have doubts to accept it. (xi: 16).

On p. xiv of the Introduction the author first says that Islam arose outside the Christian world, in pagan Arabia, and much of its expansion was among non-Christians. Only one sentence later he contradicts this statement by saying "The Arab warriors brought their religion and their dominion to the old Christian lands of the Levant and North Africa and even to Sicily, Spain, and parts of Southern Italy and France..." Apparently he wants to say by innuendo that Islam was spread by the sword of the warriors and not by the word of the preachers. This is a very old charge, often forcefully refuted, brought against Islam by its detractors and calumniators.

After briefly referring to the similarities existing between the two revealed religions — Christianity and Islam — the learned author remarks, "Muslims and Christians could dispute the relative merits of the Qur'an and the Bible and the missions of Muhammed and Christ, for both shared a common universe of discourse." A meaningful dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim is understandable as well as the missionary debate on the merits of the Qur'an and the mission of the Prophet. But to say so in the case of a Muslim that he would also call into question the merits of the Bible or the mission of Jesus Christ is something strange from the pen of an Islamicist and a historian of Islam. Enjoined as they are, it being an article of faith with them, to respect Christ and his religion, the Muslims, under no circumstances, would decry the Bible or the prophetic mission of the founder of Christianity.

In foot-note 2 on p. xvi it has been stated that some modern scholars, chiefly in the Soviet Union, have argued that the text (of the Qur'an) was not merely edited but actually composed under the Caliphs. Does it mean that the author also shares this belief of the Russians? or it has only been injected quite irrelevantly to prejudice non-Muslim students of Islam against the divine and revelational composition of the Qur'an. And who knows the Communist scholars hold the same views about the Old and New Testaments. The texts of the Torah and the various gospels composed and edited by the Apostles "assembled from works written over a long period of time," are neither considered genuine nor free from corruption by the Muslims.

The author deserves thanks also for doing this singular service to Islam by declaring that "the dichotomy of regnum and sacerdotium, deeply rooted in Western Christendom, does not exist in Islam, and, indeed, such pairs of words as spiritual and temporal, lay and ecclesiastical, and religious and secular, have no equivalents in the classical languages
of the Muslim peoples." (p. xvi). It would, however, have been much more explicit and nearer the truth to say that the Church and State, as two separate and distinct institutions, do not exist in Islam and hence "in the Islamic world, therefore, there could be no conflict between the Pope and the Emperor" (p. xvii), because "Islam has no clergy and no orthodoxy in the Christian sense". (ibid.). Further "the Ulema are men of religious learning, not priests; they receive no ordination, have no parishes and perform no sacraments." (ibid).

The author characterizes the Hadith literature as "a vast heterogenous assemblage of individual traditions" and calls much of it of "dubious origin". (pp. xviii-xix). He then proceeds to say that the Muslim jurists of medieval times chose a "more limited number" of Hadiths from the distorted and fabricated ones. And quite innocently but dexterously adds "Modern critical scholarship has dismissed many of these, as spurious and has called most of the remainder into doubt". (p. xix). The unwary and especially the non-Muslim Western students of Islamics would thereby come to believe that the entire structure of Islamic jurisprudence based upon the Hadith literature is without foundation and consequently something invented by the legists and jurists of yore. Is this statement an honest and unprejudiced interpretation of the Muslim belief and legal system? Surely not.

Dilating on the same topic he observes: "Certain categories of hadiths are of particular interest to the historian — for example, the numerous polemic hadiths directed against one tribe, faction, or sect, in the interest of another. Some, in the form of direct prophecy of future events, are palpable fakes. Others are clever fabrications in which Muḥammad is alleged to say something about events in his own time; these are not overtly prophetic but nevertheless have a direct bearing on subsequent conflicts." (p. xix). If, as the learned author maintains, these hadiths are either fabricated or "palpably fakes" of what value these are and in what way these could be "of particular interest to the historian." It is nothing short of blowing hot and could in the same breath.

Referring to legal traditions "which state a principle or establish a precedent" he avers that these are legally binding. He then remarks, "some of these may be genuine, but a large proportion represent the untheoretical response of early Islamic rulers and governors to immediate needs. Such hadiths include principles of Roman and other legal systems encountered in the conquered provinces and ad hoc decisions based on usage, political or administrative necessity or simple common sense." (p. xix). This is unmistakably an echo of what the late Professor Joseph Schacht said in his "Origins of Muslimmadan Jurisprudence" (Oxford 1950), and which has been forcefully contested and refuted by Muslim scholars including Dr. Fazlur Rahman (see his Islamic Methodology in History), formerly Director, Islamic Research Institute, Karachi-Islamabad.

The ṣāḥīḥ of the Companions (Ṣaḥāba), the Successors (Tābiʿūn) and their Successors (Tabiʿiʿūn) have also come in for criticism. "These, too, are subject to the same suspicion of having been fabricated, or at least adjusted, to serve some interest or purpose," he maintains. In short, the entire corpus of Hadith literature has been subjected to carping criticism, thereby depicting it as a worthless collection of fabricated and spurious
traditions. So Ṣaḥḥāḥī, Muslim, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Mālik ibn Anas, Abū-Dawūd, Tirmidhi; Nasaʿī et al stand thoroughly discredited and their compilations unauthentic and unreliable.

There are some other passages in the Introduction which call for comment. But the above comments and observations are a fair and clear indication of the method and purpose the author employed and kept in view when undertaking this hazardous adventure. We however, commend this book to all students of Islāms as it will conveniently afford them a glimpse into what non-Muslim scholars think of their religious literature including the Qurʾān which claims to be the Book “lā raʾy baʾthī”.

Chapter 12 of Vol. ii deals with “Slaves”. From Ibn Buṭlān’s Risālā fi Shīrā al-Raḍī (Cairo 1373/1954) some interesting passages have been translated which almost border on indecency. Here is the first piece relating to female slaves:

“How to make sure that slave-girls are free from pregnancy before purchases. They said: Be careful to ascertain that female slaves are free from pregnancy before taking possession of them, and beware of their spurious discharge and lying claims. Many of them insert other girls’ blood in their private parts”. (p. 245).

The second piece runs:

“On taking care, after purchase, of tricks to become pregnant against the owner’s will. They said: Be careful on two points. If you buy a slave-girl who has not yet reached puberty, it often happens that she reaches puberty while in your possession without your knowledge, concealing this from you because she desires mother-hood.” (p. 245).

Then follows a lengthy report (pp. 245-51) from the same source on the nature and characteristics of women belonging to different countries and climes. Of Indian women it is said that “they have good stature, brown colour, and a plentiful share of beauty, with pallor, a clear skin, fragrant breath, softness and grace, but old age comes quickly upon them”. (p. 247).

“The women of Medina are brown in colour, and of upright stature. They combine sweetness of speech and grace of body with charm, rouguishness, and beauty of form and flesh.” (p. 247).

“The women of Ṭāʾif are golden brown and shapely. They are the most cheerful of all God’s creatures, the funniest, and the merriest. They are not good as mothers of children, for they are slow to pregnancy and die at childbirth. Their men are the most active of mankind in courtship, the most assiduous in company, and the most excellent in song.” (p. 247).

While reading the above passages it should be borne in mind that the Ṣaḥāba both from the Quraysh and the Anṣār, belonged to Medina. No doubt, after the death of the Prophet many families migrated to Syria, Palestine, Egypt and other lands of Islam but many families still remained behind in Medina inasmuch as the only surviving son of Ḥusayn ibn ʿAli, after the tragedy of Karbalā, ʿAli ibn Ḥusayn, entitled Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, returned to live permanently in the city of his grand-father, i.e. Madinat al-Rasūl. Many
celebrities including, Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn 'Abi Talib, Malik ibn Anas, Nafi' ibn Malik, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq all lie in eternal peace in the Baqi' al-Gharqad, the grave-yard of Medina. Naturally they and those who followed them lived and died there. They were all Medinites. What impression would a simple uninitiated student of Islam carry about them when he reads the above-quoted beautiful passage that their kinsfolk the people of Ta'if were very fond of courtship and singing. Are these the qualities of pious, God-fearing, religious men? Is it at all "History"? At the most it is egregious buffoonery and venery.

About Yemeni women this Pundit Kokâ of the Arabs says: They are of the same race as the Egyptians, with the body of the Berbers, the rouguishness of the Medinans, and the languour of the Meccans. They are the mothers of handsome children somewhat resembling the Bedouin Arabs. (p. 248).

Writing of the Zaranji women this great sexologist makes this aphrodisian observation: A peculiarity of this race is that during sexual intercourse they sweat a liquid like musk but they are not good for motherhood. (ibid.).

One wonders how all this sexy stuff is to be treated as history. The publishers claim for the book that it is "a sweeping documentary history of Islam"; and the "emphasis of this work is on religion and the structure of Islamic society." To say the least it is hollow claim when judged against the passages cited above, and others (pp. 248-51), which have been purposely left out.

The book covers a wide range of subjects of great interest to a student and historian of Islam. Some of the topics discussed are: Religion and Sovereignty, War and Conquest, Government, the 'Abbâsids, Muslim Spain, The Rise of the Ottomans, The Mongol irruption, Persian Statecraft, Religion, Heresy and Revolt, Economy, Poetry, Medicine, Literature, Race, Creed, Slavery, the Status of Non-Muslims, Society, Satire and Humour.

A glossary of Arabic terms and a copious index add to the value of the book.