
History as a subject is characterised by its vastness, its usefulness and its beauty. Reading, for many, is a hobby, but reading history is far more than a hobby for those who are really interested in it: it is a fascination, a knowledge, a lesson, a pleasure and much else, all at one and the same time. It is an enigma of history that much as one would like to know the whole of it, the more one reads it, the more one finds the imperfection of recorded history. Likewise, the more one craves for objectivity, the greater is the subjectivity that one discovers. As far as history is concerned, there certainly does not and probably cannot exist anything like an “impartial” or a “complete” account of any person, region, era or event.

True, one should not be expecting the whole history of the Islamic world to be contained in this book merely by glancing at its title. The greater the period that a book of history tries to cover, the greater will be the blanks that it would leave. History is written by humans and read by humans. Admittedly, if a reader declares an author of a treatise on history to be highly subjective, it only means that the conflict between the subjective beliefs of the reader and those of the writer had been quite conspicuous in that particular case.

Having said that, I would like to confess that when I took up the book for review I was not expecting it to be a fully comprehensive account, nor was looking for unquestionable objectivity. I was only wondering that when so much had already been written about various events and personalities, what new perspective could this book offer in attempting to cover the whole history of one and a half millennium of a community comprising some 1.4 billion souls.

The injustice, I must say, to the study of history and religion has long been the irony that probably anyone can claim competence to take up his pen on these subjects. Every human being has the right to hold an opinion on Physics, Chemistry and Geology, but one would hardly ever, if at all, come across a book on these subjects written by someone who is not a qualified physicist, chemist or geologist. Exceptions are not gainsaid, yet books by mavericks usually fail to do justice to the topics concerned. Thus I had reason to be skeptical about a book on as specialized a subject as Islamic history by an
Before commenting on the academic worth of the book, it would be pertinent to survey its content. The book opens by telling us that according to the Qur’ān, there are two sources of human knowledge, Nature and History. The author then avers that Islamic civilisation is based on faith and that as long as Muslims adhered to it, they were successful, and fell into disarray when they lost their “spirituality” (p. xv). Although one would not have expected such sweeping generalisations at the very outset of such a work, still once the author made them, he should have established them in the course of the 74 chapters that follow, spanning over 800 or so pages. Such assertions, however, add little by way of enlightenment.

The account begins with the death of the Prophet (peace be on him) since “civilizations are tested with crises just as individuals are tested with adversity” (p. 3). Religion has to this day remained a good business for many and so was the case when many pretenders claimed prophethood during the reign of the Caliph Abū Bakr (r. 11–13/632–634). The account from the caliphate of Abū Bakr to the Battle of Karbalāʾ is of little academic value. It abounds in statements that appear as exaggerated and subjective. For instance, had Abū Bakr not become Caliph, there would have been no institution of Zakāt (p. 15), Caliph ‘Umar (r. 13–23/634–644) had the “sagacity of Joseph” (p. 15), Yazid’s (r. 60–64/680–683) army has been characterised as the “forces of darkness” (p. 49). Many other statements too are indicative of the author’s sentiments rather than his research. Surprisingly, he still had to add a note separate from the text that he had deep love for the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions (p. 25), something that is to be taken for granted rather than stated.

The book then gives glimpses of the different dynasties of Caliphate. The power of the Umayyads (65–132/684–750) was so well-established that Caliph Walid (r. 85–96/704–715) could challenge the Chinese emperor at Sinkiang, so advanced were the art and architecture of the ‘Abbāsids (132–923/750–1517) that the Caliph Hārūn (r. 170–193/786–809) could deride the gifts sent by the French King, and so vast empire of the Fatimids that (though Friday khaṭbah in their name ceased in 1047 CE from Makkah and Madinah, they controlled even the suburbs of Baghdaḏ and for a brief stint had a Governor as far away as in Multan in 1058 CE). The Crusades are dealt with in a some detail. Interesting are the accounts of the warlord Dondolo who sacked and plundered the papal city of Constantinople in 1204 CE, instead of fighting a holy war with the Muslims, over monetary dispute with the Pope. This shows the overwhelmingly material character of the crusades. Even the famous King
Richard (d. 1199 CE) was ready to part with Jerusalem and offered a deal to Sultan Saladin [Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn] (d. 589/1193) that his sister and the latter’s brother should be married who would then jointly rule the holy city. The history of the crusades epitomises religious passion, bigotry, greed, lust, conspiracies and valour.

The author laments that Muslim historians in their zeal to study the West have largely neglected the Islamic interaction with the East. The book narrates the story of the Islamic East starting from the exploits of Muḥammad ibn Qāsim (d. 97/715) to those of Maḥmūd Ghaznawī (r. 389–421/999–1030), who, the author insists, has unfairly been called an “idol-breaker” while his motives were purely economic and not at all religious (p. 135). Going farther east we are taken to the advent of Islam in Malaya and the present Indonesia. Interesting is the account of the conversion to Islam of prince Parameswara later known as Sulṭān Iskandar Shāh (d. 1424 CE), who fell in love with a Muslim princess and accepted Islam in order to marry her. The famous Muslim seaman of the era, Admiral Zheng Yi, visited his court and invited him to visit China where the latter was warmly received and where he signed a defence pact (p. 363).

The book dwells on the age of mercantile trade and the ensuing age of colonisation. We shall, however, make our comments on this aspect a little later. The way the Muslim states fell into the debt trap is also revealing. Ismāʿīl Pasha of Egypt (r. 1863–79) was made to accept loan for the construction of the Suez Canal in 1863 (p. 510). Around the same time, the European powers established a Tunisian Debt Commission, thus assuming control of the public services and resources of Tunisia (p. 610). By 1875, the debt servicing of the Ottoman empire was nearly half its total revenues (p. 507). The Muslim countries have yet to come out of this debt trap.

Coming to the last two centuries, the two principal independent Muslim empires of Turkey and Persia were not immune from the worldwide trends towards democracy, rule of law, and education. Persia made strides towards democracy and by early 20th century it had an elected parliament of 156 deputies and a recognised written constitution. The book details the struggle between the King and the Parliament wherein the latter had the last laugh when the King was deposed on 16 July 1909. The tobacco movement of Sayyīd Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī (d. 1316/1898) was the first political movement based on the concept of non-violence (p. 626), a credit usually given, perhaps unduly, to Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) and Martin Luther King (d. 1968). Shāh Muẓaffar al-Dīn of Persia (r. 1896–1906) did not give in to the public demands and the ‘ulama’ threatened to ask the Sulṭān of Turkey to take Persia under his protection as the Caliph of all Muslims (p. 629).
The political developments in Turkey are also worth mentioning. Tanzimat is the term used to signify the processes, institutions and changes initiated during 1839–1878. In 1839, Sultan ‘Abd al-Majid I (r. 1255–1277/1839–61) issued a proclamation granting equality to all citizens. This set in motion a reform process that included military reforms, tax reforms, and educational reforms, to name a few. By 1866, a Ministry of Public Education was established, and by 1895, 90% of male citizens had become literate and communications had improved. By 1876, 3000 miles of rail track had been laid, a parliament was also established, Grand Vizier Midhat Pasha (died around 1880s) being credited as being its father. The discourse of the present book ends with the year 1914 when the World War I began. It is followed by maps, chronology and bibliography.

Before concluding the review a few points about the history of Islam, in general, are in order. Most of the available literature on history had been written by Western scholars which naturally expresses their viewpoint on the interpretation of events and trends. Even the terminology of history, including terms such as “Renaissance”, “Age of Enlightenment”, “Age of Maritime Trade”, etc., are thoroughly Westo-centric. Surprisingly, Vasco de Gama (d. 1524 CE), a common law bandit who cut the noses, ears and lips of the negotiators before torturing them to death, is portrayed as an explorer, while his contemporary seaman Ahmad ibn Majid, who actually discovered the sea route to India through the Cape of Good Hope, is completely ignored. The knowledge of Geography of the Europeans of that age was so rudimentary that Deccan was called “Greater India” and East African territories were known as “Middle India” (p. 479), while the great explorer Columbus died in America (1506), believing himself to be in India.

Another misnomer is the use of the word “trade” for outright high sea piracy. Can the East India Company, which was successively punished by emperors Shāh Jahān (r. 1037–1068/1627–1658) and ‘Alamgir (r. 1068–1118/1658–1707) in India for banditry, be called a trading company by any standards? Was Lord Clive (d. 1774), who pocketed a million pounds from Mīr Ja’far (d. 1762) after the Battle of Plassey (1757), or Lord Hastings (r. 1813–1823) who extorted even the jewelry and clothes of the ladies of the royal household of Awadh, or the soldiers of Cornwallis who rushed like hounds on the dead body of Tipu Sultan (r. 1196–1213/1782–1799) to snatch jewels from his crown, observe the basic norms of human decency, let alone, trade? In Bengal, where the emperor had conferred revenue collection functions on the Company, the local cloth merchants were destroyed by an imposition of 70% taxes while cloth from Liverpool, which thus became cheaper than the cloth manufactured in Bengal, swept the market. Can this be called trade?
The biggest paradox in the use of terminology is associated with the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The soldiers hired by the Company, which itself was a beneficiary of the trading license issued by the King-emperor of Delhi, resorted to an uprising against the King and his government. Obviously, the Indian soldiers rose to the occasion and under General Bakht Khan (d. 1857), the Commander of the imperial forces, fought back in the name of the King. Now the events are called Mutiny of 1857! Mutiny that certainly was, but of the Company soldiers against the emperor. But the Western historians rewrote the English lexicon by calling the imperial commanders mutineers.

This was in South Asia. Similar stories were repeated elsewhere the Moorish civilisation of Spain, the Turkish one in Armenia, the Aztec in Mexico, the Incas in Peru, and the Mayan in Guatemala, were literally obliterated; libraries were burnt; kings and noblemen were hanged; tombs were desecrated and still the colonisation process was a civilising mission!

The Islamic civilisation is much maligned on account of the alleged maltreatment of women and slaves. True, no society could have been ideal. History bears out that women like Ra’iyah Sulṭānah (r. 634–637/1236–1240) and Shajarad al-Durr (r. 648–655/1250–1257) and slave dynasties like Mamlukes of Egypt (r. 648–784/1250–1382) and Khāndān-i Ghulām of Delhi (r. 602–695/1206–1296) have ruled the Muslims. On the other hand, the general treatment meted out to the women and slaves in the Western civilization was not enviable either. There was a time when one Arabic horse fetched more money than 18 human slaves in the streets of Venice and later a whole “cargo” of slaves could be thrown into the sea to avoid the slave ship being impounded. British serfs could be sent to the gallows through the 1535 Act of Parliament for the offence of “loitering” in London since British lords and barons did not like the sight of ragged poor roaming on the streets. Such was the status of slaves and serfs in the West. Similarly, one must say that it hardly behoves the Westerners to criticise Muslims for keeping double standards in so far as Muslim males are allowed to marry non-Muslim women and have multiple spouses whereas Muslim women do not have corresponding rights. There are numerous examples in western history of such double standards. One of these is that Dutch men were allowed to take wives or even comfort women in colonised areas, but when a Dutch woman would dare marry a Sinhalese man, she would be flogged and her children enslaved. There is no dearth of such examples.

Coming back to the book under review, one would say that it is not scientifically written and is rather a “compendium of unrelated facts,” something the author criticizes other volumes on history for (p. xiii). Moreover, the desire to write an unusually voluminous work has led to depth
being compromised. For instance, even fundamental watersheds in the history of Islam have been treated in such a cavalier fashion that the transfer of Caliphate from the Abbasids to the Ottomans in 923/1517 has been dealt with in a three-page long chapter, 51. Given the political, religious, philosophical and academic subjects involved, the change of guards was not that simple.

At least the account called for a brief mention of the main arguments by which the Ottomans justified their claim on Caliphate, including (a) that the Ottoman empire was the largest political entity of the Muslims; (b) that the last Abbaside Caliph had nominated Sultan Selim I (r. 918–926/1512–1520) as his successor Caliph (nomination being a valid form of transfer of office); (c) that the sword of the Prophet (peace be on him) that had successively been inherited by the Caliphs was now in the hands of the Ottoman Sultan; (d) that the Ottomans were the custodians of the two holy shrines of Makkah and Madīnah; (e) that the ‘ulamā’ of the empire had given fatwā to the effect that the Ottoman Caliphate was legitimate; (f) that the non-resistance from any segment of the Islamic polity indicated an ʾijmāʿ in their favour; and finally (g) that they had the right to Caliphate since they had acquired it by the sword. This can be contrasted with the account of the fall of Sarangapatam (Southern India) in 1799 where unnecessary detail about the timing of each attack on Tipu Sultan’s fort has been given by the author. Well, the author could not have covered all topics in detail but then he could have confined the work to fewer topics.

The book is replete with mistakes. Let us mention some of them. Caliph Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam (r. 65–65/684–685) is called Ḥakam bin Marwān (p. 30). At another place, al-Mustanṣir (r. 623–639/1226–1242) is described as the 36th Abbasid Caliph (p. 257), which is an obvious error. There are also many factual inaccuracies: calling the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) a Shiʿah-Sunnī dispute (p. 6) is probably wide off the mark, notwithstanding the fact that Imam Khomeini (d. 1989) and President Saddam Hussain (r. 1979–2003) belonged to different religious sects.

In any case, since the author has ignored the basic requirements of documenting his statements throughout the book, it is difficult to check the authenticity of the multiplicity of facts quoted, so much so that when he declares that the Qurʿān considers history to be a source of knowledge (p. xiii), he does not care to cite any chapter/verse reference.

I would like to conclude the review by observing that the book is deficient in many respects that one would expect from the work by even a non-specialist. However, it is a good reading for an amateur reader who is not really interested in new perspectives or insightful discussions. It contains a
brief survey of the broader history of the Muslims and can be used for general reading but not as a source book.

Saad S. Khan


Dr Murad Hofmann is an increasingly familiar figure in Islamic scholastic circles to which he has contributed not only through his extensive writings but also his frequent lecture tours. Naturally, the fact of his having been an eminent figure of one of the leading industrialist members of the Western Alliance — a former NATO Director and German Ambassador to Algeria and Morocco — has contributed to his public stature.

Having come to Islam almost a quarter century hence, Dr Hofmann joins a group that, by now, comprises a substantial number of Western writers and scholars of Islam like Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Sirajuddin), Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood and Gai Eaton who enjoy the distinction of being able to see Islam and Muslims from a unique vantage point of newly-incarnated “insiders” who, for varying periods, were “outsiders”. This is a view that bounds on the picture of the earth taken from outer space showing the physical West-East divide as day and night clearly divided by a single line running from north to south that appears on the title cover of this book.

The importance of such Western scholars, who have reverted (the current term for “conversion”) to Islam, in jump-starting a new intellectual movement amongst the Muslim intelligentsia cannot be exaggerated in view of the inferiority complex (vis-à-vis the “developed” West) from which many “modern” Muslims suffer. Thus many Muslims, especially the younger members of the Muslim diaspora in the West and the Westward-looking youth in the home countries, are more likely to be influenced by scholarly works of persons like Dr Murad Hofmann than by persons who are otherwise recognized as intellectual giants of classical Islamic learning in various parts of the Muslim world.