Two other recent books on interreligious dialogue that do specifically incorporate a Muslim perspective are *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), and *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*, by Ataullah Siddiqui (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). The former includes essays by two prominent Muslim scholars working in the United States, Ibrahim Abu Rabi and Mahmoud Ayoub, while the latter incorporates the viewpoints of Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, Ayoub, Hasan Askari, Khurshid Ahmad, Mohammed Talbi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Joseph Molleur


Anyone familiar with medieval Arabic chronicles and literary sources for the early ‘Abbāsid period is well aware that they are full of fascinating anecdotal and narrative material about the lives of the caliphs which historians have used to construct biographies, especially for seemingly larger-than-life figures such as Hārūn al-Rashīd and his son al-Ma‘ānī. But what does this material really tell us about these men? Certainly it can be and has been used to construct a basic narrative framework for a particular caliph’s reign, though divergent accounts present some problems even on this basic level. However, the elusive and allusive nature of so much of this material leaves one wondering whether what is recorded is a genuine reflection of actual events and occurrences or whether it can be better understood as reflections of the sympathies, prejudices, aspirations and subsequent eras of the chroniclers themselves. If one opts for the latter more skeptical approach, as does El-Hibri, he is then left with the difficult proposition of how to separate the intertwining lines of fiction and fact in these sources. El-Hibri pursues this goal by seeking to answer three fundamental questions. “What did the narratives about the caliphs signify in their times? How did anecdotes convey various levels of thematic meaning? To what extent were literary tropes appreciated and detected by the medieval audience”? (p. 2). None of these is an easy question to answer, and El-Hibri is to be commended for tackling such difficult questions head on.

El-Hibri’s answers to these questions may strike some as too skeptical, too speculative or too theoretical. His central thesis is that “the historical accounts of the early ‘Abbāsid caliphs were originally intended to be read not for facts, but for their allusive power. Their descriptions of the lives of caliphs may seem realistic, but the narrators intended their anecdotes to form a frame for social, political, and religious commentary” (p. 216). In addition, his recurrent disclaimer that the historicity of one or another narrative account can never be ascertained will likely leave the more epistemologically optimistic feeling rather discouraged. Nevertheless, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* is a refreshing, thoughtful, meticulously researched, wide-ranging, meaty, insightful and even entertaining literary-critical reassessment of medieval Islamic historiography on the early ‘Abbāsid caliphate.
In Chapter 1, “Historical background and introduction”, El-Hibri provides a survey of early ‘Abbāsid history from the period of the revolution in the 740s CE down to the accession of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 786 CE. It is here that he sets forth the themes which receive the lion’s share of attention in the literature, including ‘Abbāsid messianism, the disproportionate emphasis on affairs in Khurāsān prior to and during the revolution, the interaction of Baghdad and Khurāsān in early ‘Abbāsid history, the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn, the relationship between the ‘Alids and the ‘Abbāsids, extensive coverage of the relationships between caliphs and their viziers and commanders, etc. According to El-Hibri, decoding such an array of texts and themes “involves the dual task of tracing the line of meaning and establishing linkages across eras, regions, and systems of thought. The plot of certain stories occasionally penetrates, sequentially or sporadically, within a coherent historical phase across fragmented narratives. Equally, however, the line of meaning tends to break out of the anticipated historical order, intruding in an intertextual manner on other histories (Biblical, Sasanid, Rashidun, or Umayyad), depending on a linkage of character, motif, moral, or puzzle” (p. 15). In the remaining chapters 2–6 (2. Hārūn al-Rashīd: where it all started or ended; 3. Al-Amīn: the challenge of regicide in Islamic memory; 4. Al-Ma’mūn: the heretic Caliph; 5. The structure of civil war narratives; 6. Al-Mutawakkil: an encore of the family tragedy), El-Hibri seeks to decode the meaning of these chronicles and narratives as a whole by applying his methodology to an examination of the personalities or families involved — “the caliphs as texts, as it were” (p. 15).

In Chapter 2, El-Hibri examines the often-idealized character al-Rashīd who has left such a durable image on modern society, especially as portrayed in the tales of The Thousand and One Nights. He does not seek to author another biography of the caliph. In fact, he asserts that “a slimmer version of the true events of the life of the caliph, something not exceeding three of four pages” (p. 21), is all one can expect to compile from the information available. What he is concerned with is trying to understand how the material found in the narratives was ordered in such a way as to be intuitively intelligible and most meaningful to the medieval authors and their audiences. It is El-Hibri’s contention that the story of al-Rashīd’s caliphate “actually forms a carefully crafted tale whose purpose was much less to entertain than to address controversial views and religious, cultural, and moral issues most hotly contested in the century immediately following al-Rashīd’s death” (p. 21). What we find, then, is not so much a history of al-Rashīd’s caliphate as a running commentary on his relationship with the ‘ulamā’, his asceticism, his piety, his relationship with the Barmakid family, his relationship with his two sons — al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn — all of which serve as means of accessing the debates within subsequent scholarly communities about issues such as the proper roles of the caliphate and the ‘ulamā’ in society as a whole (especially in light of the mihnah), as well as the issues of caliphal succession and the unfolding of the civil war between the two brothers.

In Chapter 3 there is a fascinating discussion of the recurrent problem of regicide faced by early Islamic historians. By the time of al-Amīn’s murder in 817 there already was a substantial body of commentary on the moral implications of
regicide as portrayed in the treatments of the murders of ‘Uthmān (656 CE) and al-Walīd II (744 CE). Without a doubt, al-‘Amin is largely portrayed as an incompetent prince who was fond of wine, women, and song — something he had more in common with al-Walīd II than with ‘Uthmān. However, he was the caliph. Moreover, he was an ‘Abbāsid and hence a member of the Prophet’s household. So how could he be removed from power? How could his murder be justified, if at all? Not surprisingly, much of the literature on al-‘Amin is sympathetic to al-Ma’mūn’s claims to the caliphate, though El-Hibri demonstrates quite clearly that there was a significant trend in the literature sympathetic to al-‘Amin’s cause. Although there was considerable disagreement as to whether al-‘Amin was responsible for triggering the civil war with his brother, the more important question is whether his murder was legitimate and who was ultimately responsible for his death — al-Ma’mūn, Tahir, al-Fadl b. Sahl?

Chapter 4 treats al-Ma’mūn’s caliphate and since Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography began as a study of al-Ma’mūn and “the pivotal political and religious transitions that accompanied his rise to power” (p. viii), it is understandably the most detailed and interpretive chapter of the lot. El-Hibri focuses on what he calls two layers of orthodox antagonism to al-Ma’mūn during his caliphate as well as in the subsequent historiography about him; that is, his role in the mihrah as well as the civil war with his brother. El-Hibri examines in detail the structure of the civil war narratives in Chapter 5. Although the mihrah was a clear and tangible intellectual and religious battle between the caliph and the ‘ulamā’ — many of whom seemed to delight in portraying his sudden death in 833 as some sort of divine vindication of their own cause — El-Hibri argues that the real root of their antagonism to him lay in the crucial political issue of the events surrounding the events that brought him to power, especially the lingering fear that his rebellion was yet another millenarian Khurasani revolt.

Moreover, El-Hibri argues that these same accounts can be used to construct a more realistic portrait of al-Ma’mūn’s caliphate that was characterized by increasing absolutism as he was able to reunify the empire after the civil war, rebuild its administrative system, and create new religious, political and military elites loyal solely to himself. But he was more than an absolutist monarch; he was an imposing man possessed of a “complex personality with diverse dimensions of identity — as caliph, philosopher, and Persian monarch — fused in one character” (p. 142). El-Hibri even speculates that he might have envisioned himself as a kind of Alexander, for both shared much in common — a deference for Aristotle, a fascination with ancient Egypt, and an illness contracted in the icy waters of Tarsus. But more than this connection to Alexander, El-Hibri argues that in his last year, al-Ma’mūn saw himself as more than the caliph who had vindicated his ancestors or settled old scores between the Persian and Roman worlds. Rather, “he had come to see himself as the leader who would finally attain the revenge of Darius over Alexander and finish the mission of Islamic conquest at the same time” (p. 142).

In Chapter 6, El-Hibri examines the portrayal of al-Mutawakkil’s caliphate and its similarities with that of al-Rashid. Al-Ma’mūn was succeeded by his brother al-Mu’tasim [833–842 CE] who in turn designated two of his own sons in succession —
al-Wathiq [842–847 CE] and al-Mutawakkil [847–861 CE]. El-Hibri argues that al-Mutawakkil’s caliphate in Sāmarrā’ is a reprise of sorts of al-Rashīd’s in Baghdad. As is the case in the accounts of al-Rashīd’s reign, the narratives are “ordered around specific characters — family members, viziers, and commanders — who occupy roles that interact in a way that never fully resolves one political problem without engendering another ethical crisis” (p. 179). Of course, the most prominent ethical questions are raised by al-Mutawakkil’s assassination, which El-Hibri examines with considerable sophistication in light of the sources’ often-negative depiction of the Turkish commanders, their more nuanced treatments of the murders of ’Uthmān, al-Walīd II and al-ʿAmin, as well as their portrayal of the uncomfortable predicament faced by al-Muntasir upon succeeding his father as caliph.

*Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* is clearly intended for specialists, but can easily be used by graduate as well as advanced undergraduate students — especially in conjunction with the now-completed translation of al-Ṭabarî’s *History*. However, there are two niggling issues that make it less user friendly, especially for the non-specialist, than it need be: (1) Since a literary-critical study of this type requires extensive quotations from the sources being examined, it is odd that not all the Arabic passages discussed are translated into English. Most are, but at times a passage is simply left in Arabic transliteration. Obviously, this does not pose a problem for Arabists, but not all readers of this book will be Arabists. (2) A chronologically accurate map of the area in question would be very helpful, especially one which indicated the many places discussed in the texts that are loaded with symbolic meaning — Khurāsān, Raqqā, Tūs, Tarsus, etc. But these are mere quibbles. *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* is a very welcome addition to the ongoing debates about early Islamic history — especially the early ‘Abbāsid period — and will likely become and remain the standard work on Islamic historiography of the late 8th and early 9th centuries for some time to come.

James E. Lindsay


This collection of essays is the product of the Fourteenth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference (May 7–9, 1993), held in honour of Professor George Makdisi, arguably one of the most influential cultural historians of medieval Islam. The six-year delay in the publication of these essays is one peculiarity of the book. Other peculiarities include a certain disparity in the quality of the essays and, more prominently, the inadequate editorial work on the part of Hovannisian and Sabagh. The serious editorial problem is addressed at the end of this review.