Book Reviews


In his recent book, *In Search of Muhammad*, Clinton Bennett has an ambitious goal of investigating into who the Prophet Muhammad was historically and what he currently means for Muslims in terms of their faith and beliefs. Bennett is interested in moving beyond the historical facts of the Prophet's life by exploring his theological significance in the Islamic tradition and in the lives of contemporary Muslims.

The strength of this book lies in Bennett's conscious understanding of the limitations in appreciating that the essence of spiritual meaning in another tradition first requires one to see how the discourse of the other has been shaped by outsiders. On page 5 of his 'introduction', the author states that "the others became objects defined not by their own discourses, but by a discourse which was imposed on them from outside". This is Bennett's way of confronting the historical Orientalist religious literature which was not interested in Islam as it was viewed and practiced by Muslims. As a non-Muslim scholar of Islam and committed to his Christian beliefs, Bennett situates his study to better understand the spiritual place of the Prophet in Islamic practice, but more importantly to see if an outsider to the tradition can also recreate or engage with that sense of spiritual appreciation of the Prophet. Bennett utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach to understand the Prophet and the Muslim connection to him by drawing on historiography, theology, and anthropological studies. By attempting to be an “insider” or virtual Muslim, Bennett tries to see the phenomenology of the Islamic tradition as practiced by Muslims on its own religious terms. He coins this type of work an “anthropology of theology” which allows him to get first hand experience with Muslim practices, hear Muslim voices, and read the texts as closely as possible.

Bennett divides his book into six chapters not including a conclusion that is primarily a postmodern exercise of religious reflection. In chapter one Bennett reconstructs the basic primary sources accounting for the Prophet’s life such as the Qur’an, *Sirah* works, and *Hadith* collections. While this is a brief survey of primary sources to introduce the reader to the main sources, Bennett relies too heavily on translations and not the original Arabic texts that pertain to the Prophet’s life. His dependence on translations forces him to deal with them as any other type of secular texts, not realizing how he might have missed...
It is in chapter four that Bennett brings his work to the forefront by demonstrating the progression of European writers since the Renaissance to the present. For Bennett it were scholars like John Gagnier (d. 1740) and Edward Pocock (d. circa 1650) who began the translation of Islamic sources into European languages and making use of them. The first approach of scholars that commented on Islam like Thomas Carlyle, Immanuel Kant, and Liebnitz, viewed Islam as a rational and reasonable religion. This generation of European scholars was more interested in pursuing the psychological make up of the Prophet which would bring insight into his spirituality. The second approach of scholars, according to Bennett, would include Sir William Muir who used his writings on the Prophet and Islam for evangelical purposes. While Muir is praised as being one of the first Orientalists to write an extensive four-volume work on the Prophet, he was primarily occupied with convincing Muslims that they were being misled by a false religion and their religious tradition opposed truth. (pp.112) The third approach identified by Bennett is represented by scholars like Reginald Smith and Tor Andrae who were interested in understanding how Muslims viewed their Prophet in their own tradition. In this category Bennett placed the distinguished scholar Montgomery Watt, whose works are a major resource for the author's own research.

I do not see the value of chapter five which is entitled “Muhammad’s Significance in the Muslim Life and Thought” to the research at hand and it is disconnected from the scope of the project. While Bennett aims to discuss the legacy of the Prophet in successive Muslim generations, instead he digresses into meaningless historical summaries of legal schools, political history, issues of authority, Sunni-Shi‘i differences, and popular practices within the Sufi tradition. Either he should have developed his inquiry of the spiritual and existential legacy of the Prophet in each of these areas or not attempt to write a historical survey that borders on uselessness.

If there was one section that illustrates Bennett’s true scholarly depth it would be in the conclusion which is an exploration of a post-modern theology of thought. He unnecessarily spends about fifteen pages to rehash the Salman Rushdie controversy as an example of contemporary problems of perceived insider and outsider accounts of the tradition. His point is well taken that Rushdie’s understanding of the Islamic tradition is more along the lines of early Christian polemical writers and it was his assumed place in the tradition and his access to texts by Muslims that added to global tensions. I think Bennett should have expanded upon the under-developed sections on “Towards a Muslim View of the Prophet” and “A Trinitarian world-view”. It is in these areas that Bennett poses some interesting questions as a Christian whether he can find a theological balance of God’s self-disclosure in the Trinity and Islam’s concept of prophetology and in the Qur’an being the word of God. While for him Jesus was a divine saviour for humankind and it is his main form to decode the universe and meaning of existence, although he does show the importance of Hans Küng’s works who does accept the authenticity of the
Prophet as the messenger of God and the Qur'an as revelation. Bennett's excellent point that there is a hermeneutic of faith that is tied into reading the texts and constructing our perception of the Prophet or Jesus is very true considering one's spirituality is connected to this very process. It is here that Bennett brings a real dialogue of theological inquiry of Christian-Muslim relations that is not only meaningful for mutual understanding, but more importantly, it is tied into genuine efforts to learn from each other based on what we believe, where our faiths take us, and what faith really means at the core of our spiritual lives.

This is a valuable book for any student of Islam and anyone involved in contemporary Christian-Islamic dialogue. Bennett's In Search of Muhammad is a welcome addition to the field of comparative religious studies because it represents the author's striving to truly understand the theology of faith according to Muslims while not compromising with the Christian tradition to which the author belongs. If there were more impressive books like this one, it would be possible to move closer toward a real theological mutual understanding.

Qamar-ul Huda


While Islamic law has always been one of the topics of study in Islamic studies from the earliest periods of Orientalist scholarship, it has come to the fore in the eighties and nineties with a renewed relevance. This is partly due to a renewed interest among Islamist leaders, whose discourse focuses on the Shari'ah as a tool for social and political reform. Another important factor is the steadily increasing interest in comparative law, or international law, which has been demonstrated by law schools around the country. As the business and economics seem to become increasingly global in scope, lawyers, scholars, and businessmen are being forced to deal with progressively complex legal interactions of fundamentally differing legal traditions.

As a result of this as well as other factors, more and more law schools are offering Islamic law courses, and academia has been encouraged as well to further develop this area of Islamic Studies. Kamali's book is a welcome addition to the body of English works available to students especially at a time when the study of Islamic law is becoming a more frequent specialty in the field of Islamic Studies. The book sets out to summarize the basic techniques