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Book Reviews

Francis Robinson. *The Muslim World in Modern South Asia: Power, Authority, Knowledge*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020. Pp. xix+419. Hardbound. ISBN: 978-1-4384-8301-6.

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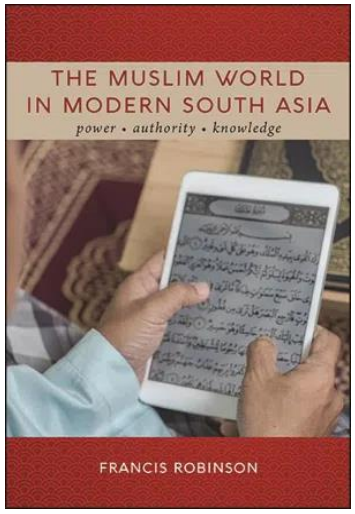

Francis Robinson (b. 1944), the author of the book under review, is a prolific British historian, serving as Professor of the History of South Asia at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has extensively written on religious change in the Muslim world, with a particular focus on South Asia from the eighteenth century to the present. His most famous works include, inter alia, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860–1923* (1974), *The 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (2001), and *Jamal Mian: The Life of Jamaluddin Abdul Wahab of Farangi Mahall, 1919-2012* (2018).

Robinson earned his PhD from Cambridge University. In the 1960s, when he was still a student, it was the heyday of the Cambridge School of Indian history, co-founded by Anil Seal (b. 1938) and John Andrew Gallagher (d. 1980). Other illustrious historians of the school included Gordon Johnson (b. 1943), Richard L. Gordon (b. 1943), and David A. Washbrook (d. 2021). The historians associated with the school privileged the elite perspective over the people's history, as well as the political institutions of British India over sociological or economic considerations. The school approached the study of colonial Indian history from a political and imperialist perspective. Though Robinson benefited from the founders of the Cambridge School, he took a departure from their standpoint and emphasized religious, intellectual, social, and cultural aspects of Indian history.

The book under review reflects this academic departure. It is a collection of scholarly research articles and book reviews published in various journals, edited works as chapters, and magazine essays, some initially delivered as public lectures. The work brings to the forefront very diverse themes ranging from political and sociocultural to intellectual, literary, and aesthetic subjects.

The study of Islam and Muslims has conventionally been focused on the Middle East, privileging it as its heartland or the "centre," while completely ignoring, or tangentially covering, the Muslim societies beyond the Middle East, thus relegating regions like South Asia to "peripheral." Challenging this unfounded assumption, the book under review situates South Asia in the broader framework of the Muslim world as an indispensable part of the latter.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, it explores the interconnected themes of power, authority, and knowledge. It investigates the phenomenon of Western domination of the Muslim world, which created opportunities for restructuring the colonial and post-colonial societies "from below," as manifested in the wide-ranging efforts for religious renewal and reform among the Muslims, largely through the establishment of *madrasah*s engaged in the dissemination of religious knowledge.

The concept of modernity, theorized by mid-twentieth-century theorists like Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, and imagined as a linear progression with a Eurocentric bias, is challenged by Robinson, who suggests that instead of Western modernity as the sole or standard variant, there existed multiple "modernities," which may follow different trajectories in varied regions and sociocultural contexts. These modernities in Muslim societies have often been linked with the movements of renewal and reform, as the authority of the past was eroded by such movements. Moreover, modernity in the South Asian context was characterized by the new emphasis on human will, transformation of the self, rationalization, and secularization, according to Robinson (pp. 211-24). Nonetheless, the assumed absence of these characteristics before the emergence of modernity in South Asia by the author, is difficult to accept.

The book shows how, in the face of modernist challenges, the Muslim societies exhibited remarkable creativity in social, cultural, and literary realms to sustain the authority of their practices. Citing empirical evidence across the Muslim world, the work contextualizes two types of responses: first, the spread of Islamic modernism (characterized by the ideals of individual activism, social responsibility, and direct relationship with God and the sacred sources) as a response of the Muslim elite to the Western domination, and secondly, the rise of

Islamism expressed in varied movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The work particularly takes note of the increasing role of women in revivalist movements as well as in public spaces, including the spheres of politics and economy.

The book includes an interesting chapter on global history from an Islamic angle (chapter 2), which refutes the idea that global history can only be interpreted from a Western lens or a Eurocentric perspective. It argues that the Muslim world developed its "world system," with tales from the Muslim world travelling beyond its confines, along with shared notions of astrology and astronomy, and commodities having global outreach. Nonetheless, the author compares the revivalist and reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Muslim world with the "Protestant turn" (Reformation) in Europe (pp. 75-79). Though one can find a few similarities between the two historical developments, both had their own peculiarities and contexts; hence, their comparison seems somewhat untenable. At other places, the author seems to be very mindful of the problem of Eurocentrism, or the East-West binary, but at times, it becomes difficult to altogether transcend the given conceptual categories based on this binary, especially when he tries to counter the clash of civilizations thesis.

The work's chapter on education in the medieval and early modern Muslim world declares the idea of the significance of the acquisition of knowledge as a religious obligation as the cornerstone of Muslim civilization. The transmission of knowledge was generally informal, characterized by a profoundly personal kind of teacher-pupil relationship. The tenth-century witnessed the emergence of purpose-built *madrasah*s, established by kings, nobles, scholars, judges, administrators, and army men, which later grew into multi-functional "educational-charitable complexes," that at times included a mosque, a *madrasah*, a library, a Sufi lodge, a hospital, a pharmacy, a madhouse, an orphanage, a hostel for travellers, and even an observatory. He further adds that after the collapse of the Mughal Empire, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the laity in the Muslim societies that supported the *'ulamā'* and their *madrasah*s. Simultaneously, the religious authority of the *'ulamā'* was also undermined with the rise of new religious groups and individuals, challenging the conventional interpretations of the Muslim faith. Moreover, in addition to the *'ulamā'*, the writers and practitioners of Greek medicine, or the *ḥakīm*s, also tried to sustain their authority. In his discussion on the crisis of authority in the Muslim world in the twentieth century, the author's contention that the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) in 1924 signalled the ending of the political authority of Prophet

Muḥammad (peace be on him) (p. 154) should be taken with a pinch of salt. The Prophet of Islam never claimed to be a caliph of God in a political sense, and the institution of caliphate, too, underwent a drastic transformation since the early days of Islam. The self-styled caliphs ruled their empires like autocratic monarchs, often setting aside the Prophetic traditions.

Robinson's work also explores the long-term relationship between South Asia and West and Central Asia, from where many invading armies came. The Mughal Empire strengthened the Persian influence in the field of statecraft and politics, court culture, Persian language, and literature, as the Mughal court attracted nobles, poets, and other ambitious individuals from Persia. However, the establishment of the hegemonic power of the British diminished the Persian influence. Moreover, the rise of Islamic reform replaced Persian with Arab elements, except among the Shia groups. In modern times, the influence of South Asia in West and Central Asia has been of note.

While historicizing Islam and political power in South Asia, the author notes that the memory of power and the notion of Muslim "political importance" among the Muslims, which was instilled by the Aligarh movement, has been a source of inspiration and drive for the political elite who led the All-India Muslim League and the Pakistan movement. The work also analyses the emergence of modern nation states in South Asia in 1947 in the wake of decolonization, as in many other parts of Asia and Africa, which undermined cosmopolitanism, but later the phenomenon of migration, and the notions of citizenship, globalization, and multiculturalism contested the ideology of nationalism and nation states.

The volume also contains an oration delivered at the funeral of Ralph Russell (d. 2008), a notable scholar of Urdu language and literature who taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK. In addition, the book contains academic reviews of translations of two medieval love narratives: Dick Davis' English translation of Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī's *Vis and Ramin* (composed around 1050 CE) and Aditya Behl's translation of Shaykh Quṭb al-Dīn Suhravardī's *The Magic Doe* (composed in 1503 CE). Moreover, the book includes reviews of Stephen Dale's work on Timurid history, contextualizing *Bāburnāmah*, the memoirs of Mughal Emperor Bābur (r. 1526-1530), Dilip Hiro's abridged edition of *Bāburnāmah*, Musharraf Farooqi's English translation of Ghālib Lakhnavī's famed Indo-Persian epic, *Dāstān-i Amīr Ḥamzah*, along with a discussion on the storytelling tradition in the Muslim world, Ali Akbar Husain's work on scent, aromatherapy, and the tradition of developing gardens in the major

cities of early modern Deccan, Fergus Nicoll's book on Mughal Emperor Shāh Jahān (r. 1628-58), and Seema Alavi's work on the connections of Indian Muslims with British, Ottoman and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century, or the "Muslim cosmopolis," through the life histories of five eminent leaders.

The last two chapters of the book, offering reviews of Eugene Rogan's work on the history of the Arabs in post-1517 era coming down to the early twenty-first century with substantial focus on the twentieth century issues such as Arab-Israel conflict, and the edited work by Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach on women's religious authority across the Muslim world and beyond, seem out of place in the volume, as their focus is hardly South Asia.

The work covers a very wide range of subjects, and that is why, at times, the reader feels the depth of rigorous analysis by the author, but at times, the treatment of the subject matter seems to be analytically less rigorous. Such observations notwithstanding, the book offers very brilliant insights and makes for an interesting read to scholars, students, and researchers.

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M. Kabir Hassan, Paolo Biancone, Aishath Muneeza, eds. *Islamic Finance in Eurasia: The Need for Strategic Change*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024. Pp. 358. ISBN: 9781035308699.

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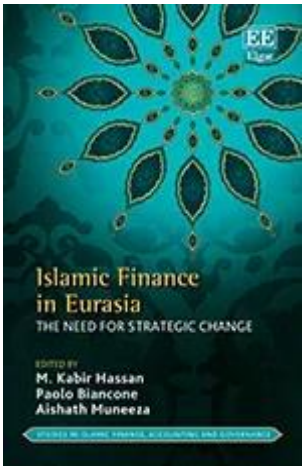

Islamic finance, which began as a passion for a small group of religiously committed individuals, has grown into a $4.5 trillion industry over the past five decades, and its evolution is a fascinating story. In some countries, the discovery of oil and gas has fuelled Islamic finance's growth, while in others, it has flourished due to the strong commitment of emigrants who are determined to earn in a way that aligns with their faith and values. Some nations, recognizing the needs of their populations, have embraced Islamic banking and finance to promote greater financial inclusion. Meanwhile, other countries have adopted Islamic finance as a strategic move to attract foreign capital.

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