

REVIEW

Michael A. Cook: *A History of the Muslim World: From Its Origins to the Dawn of Modernity*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. ISBN 978 069123657 5.

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This book offers a “panoramic history” of the Islamic world until 1800. The author is renowned scholar Michael Cook, who is primarily concerned “with the formation of Islamic civilization, and the role played by religious values in that process”, as evident in his seminal *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (2000). Authoring the 900-page *A History of the Muslim World* in Cook’s distinctly clear, enjoyable and entertaining style was a formidable undertaking. The author relies on a myriad of anecdotes and snapshots, “zooming in and out” (p. xx) to weave the book’s overarching narrative and in preparation for its epilogue. The reader is guaranteed to gain new knowledge about pre- and early Islamic Arabia and appreciate the diversity of the pre-modern Islamic world.

Largely concerned with the competition between centripetal and centrifugal forces, the book occasionally portrays the tensions amongst perceived ethnic groupings as having played a central and uninterrupted role throughout Islamic history. This important theme shapes the book’s structure, which is arranged chronologically into three parts. The first covers the history of the Muslim world from late antiquity to the eleventh century and reflects the author’s expertise in the early period. The second part examines regional developments in the eastern and western Islamic lands before the nineteenth century. The third part is an epilogue which “continues the story to the present day”.

Parts I and II follow the traditional “rise and fall” genre (in Cook’s words, “the making and unmaking of states”, p. xx). They focus on tensions between perceived ethnic groupings, relying on a debatable conception of regions in the pre-modern Islamic world. Both parts largely disregard groundbreaking advances made over the last decade in the subjects of ethnogenesis, ethno-linguistic continuity and nationalist historiographies in the Islamic context. The book’s treatment of “Arabs”, “Berbers”, “Persians” and “Turks” and, moreover, its disproportionate attention to and conception of regions, for example, lumping Central Asia with Iran (chapter 8) should have further engaged with studies like: Ramzi Roughi, *Inventing the Berbers* (2019); Ali Anooshahr, *Turkestan and the Rise of Eurasian Empires* (2018); Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* (2017); and Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism* (2016). This state-of-the-art research, while open to debate, is not engaged with, but rather brushed off as a “different” view or “a very different perspective” (p. 15 and 209) in the case of Webb and Roughi’s monographs.

The epilogue (chapter 15) covers “the interaction of the Muslim world with western Europe” (p. 779) to the present day. I shall limit my discussion here to my field of

expertise. In a section titled “Muslim attitudes to Christian Europe” (pp. 829–35) Cook resorts to frequently used and widely misinterpreted quotes from the *Book of Contemplations* by Usāma Ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) about the Franks (crusaders). Even more problematic, the author lumps Ibn Munqidh together in this discussion with an unexpected selection of figures that includes Khedive Ismā‘īl, Atatürk, Mawdūdī, Sayyid Quṭb and Osama bin Laden. Similarly anachronistic connections based on source material from the crusader period have sadly become common nowadays.

The epilogue reiterates views that Cook has previously voiced in *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (2014). In a review of this work (2017), Bruce B. Lawrence refuted Cook’s claim of a prevailing Islamic exceptionalism that is incompatible with the modern world. The exceptionalism argument is further buttressed in the present book by the author’s reliance on the metaphor of the “Black Swan Event” (pp. 55–6) to explain the rise of Islam as an unpredictable occurrence in history. This metaphor contradicts an array of existing scholarly explanations of the emergence of Islam in the context of late antiquity and Cook’s own admiration for the human ability “to build exotically different cultures on more or less the same biological and material foundations” (p. xix).

While it is accurate to say that the book ignores no “vast regions or periods” (p. xx) and does not claim to offer an economic and social or intellectual history, its title still promises to offer *A History of The Muslim World*. Yet a quick glance at the treatment of the Zangid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods, which are combined in one short section titled “The Turkic expansion in the southwest”, highlights the limitations of what the book pledged to survey. The Mamluk sultanate, a good 250 years of Islamic history, is covered in only four pages (pp. 423–8). Furthermore, the book’s treatment of the post-Seljuq central Islamic lands does not sufficiently engage with the scholarly advances achieved over the past three decades in the histories of Islamic urban institutions, Sufism, theology and jurisprudence, charity, knowledge transmission, libraries, art and architecture, poetry and literature, urban elites, women, non-Muslims under Islamic rule, trade and commerce, and taxation.

Two final remarks are warranted here. The first is that this extensive book offers no bibliography and few footnotes, making it unsuitable for research and not recommended for teaching purposes (although some would argue that a scholar like Cook is to be read for his views). The author says that he limits his use of footnotes to instances of scholarly disagreement (p. xx) and that the reader should always assume that the book is drawing on secondary sources (p. xxiv). Moreover, Cook invites his readers to contact him directly when in need of a reference. Although this enthusiasm is laudable, it is an impracticable solution that should not be left to any author’s benevolence: historians rely on footnotes and citations and elaborate referencing systems (and bibliographies) to avoid plagiarism, allow others to consult the sources and extend their learning further and, most importantly, acknowledge the contributions and hard work of other scholars and researchers. The acknowledgements section should by no means become a substitute; any academic publisher should uphold its publishing standard without exception.

The second and final remark derives from Cook’s confession that “readers will probably not have much trouble figuring out that I like some of the people I write about more than I like others” (p. xxi), since the values he holds “have a way of coloring the way I see the past”. In turn, readers may find themselves speculating on whom the author likes and dislikes in the Islamic past, why this was the case, and how these feelings may have coloured *A History of The Muslim World*.