

## The Uses (and Abuses) of Muslim History in Understanding Islam

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I did not expect Chase Robinson's history of Muslim rule in the seventh and eighth centuries to be immediately relevant to the contemporary debates on Islam, in particular about whether or not there is an unavoidable clash between it and the (Christian) West. But, his *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) manages to illuminate these debates, albeit only if read critically.

Robinson begins his study of the changes that occurred in the status of Christian and Muslim elites in present-day Syria and Iraq following the Muslim conquest by noting the difficulty of writing about a period about which there is such a dearth of primary sources. Where such sources (like conquest treaties) do exist, he says they have little truth-value. Further, conquest history actually "describes post-conquest history" (12); thus, what we know of the conquest, we know from writings of the post-conquest era, an exercise in which both Christians and Muslim had an equal stake since "the conquest past could serve to underpin [their] authority alike" (17).

Yet, Robinson does manage to reconstruct the conquest past, thanks largely to the works of a tenth-century Muslim historian, al-Azdi. However, even as he admits that writing "a history of Mosul might fairly be called re-writing al-Azdi" (ix), Robinson also suggests that it is his rewriting of al-Azdi's work that gives it the political meanings that it (and Muslim historiography in general) lacks.

His objective in writing this history, Robinson says, is to explain the nature of Islamic rule, though, as he also clarifies, "what I have called 'Islamic rule' is little more than a trope" (50). However, he does not say in what ways it is a metaphor, leaving one with the impression that Islam and Muslims are identical, which of course they are not, unless one considers everything Muslims do to be "Islamic" by definition.

In Robinson's telling, "Islamic rule" was extremely benign for Christians since it not only allowed urban notables to solidify their own power, but it also freed the Church from the state's control. The Church not only gained "autonomy from the state, but it lost its only rival (also the state) for the services of privileged families. The result was a hardy and durable Christian identity that was symbolised by Church authorities, many of who wrote their community's past" (168-169). Church building proceeded apace during the seventh century which witnessed the "birth of a vibrant church and monastic culture," and it was only in the mid-eighth century, "after Abbasid rule was imposed from Iraq [that] some restrictions began to appear" (13-14).

As for the conquest itself, Robinson notes that by some Christian accounts, the Christians "willingly handed their city [Mosul] to the Muslims" (12) and that there is not "a single example of detailed battle narrative" by Christian writers. Instead, there are "examples of negotiated settlement" (30). However, instead of seeing in this evidence that Islam was

not everywhere spread by the sword, as Western stereotypes would have it, he ascribes it to the Christian desire for “harmonious coexistence” with the Muslims (15).

Interestingly, Robinson’s account fails to yield evidence of Muslim persecution of the Christians, or even to establish Muslim wars as wars of religion notwithstanding claims by some Muslims to be acting as God’s agents (holy warriors). However, because of his own tendency to confuse Islam with Muslims and his distorted view of Islam, he fails to differentiate between these claims and Islam’s teachings.

For instance, he asserts that “Islam seems to have meant jihad and conquest led by commanders and caliphs, themselves instruments of God’s providential will” (166), and that God has made “sacral violence . . . incumbent upon all Muslims” (124). This is not just uninformed scholarship, it is misguided in its attribution to God of the violence that Muslims thought fit to commit historically. For the record, the Qur’an not only does not use the word “jihad” for war, but it only permits *qital*, or fighting, for the purpose of defending against religious persecution, not for conquest, expansion, or aggrandizement. Even the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad does not advocate such wars. Further, the wars Robinson cites were civil wars among Muslims and not wars meant to force Islam on non-Muslims; they thus hardly qualify as holy wars. This is not to say that Muslims did not claim to be fighting religious wars, but as he notes himself of the conquest, its representation in “theocratic terms” was a (later) rationalization (33).

Equally egregiously, Robinson refers to “Muhammad’s (apparent) marriage of ethnicity and creed” (109), and claims that the reluctance of the Muslim caliphs to promote “the most powerful of all methods of political integration—conversion—says more about the extraordinary persuasiveness of Muhammad’s fusion of ethnicity and monotheism than it does about their enthusiasm for empire building” (168). Clearly, if Robinson had known anything about Islam, he would have known that Islam *de-linked* monotheism from race, ethnicity, culture, bloodlines, and so on, by defining the ummah (community) in terms simply of a distinctive articulation of faith.

If Robinson’s misuses of Muslim history to “explain” Islam constitutes a weakness in his argument, the other must surely be the epistemic move that establishes him as the arbiter of the meaning of other people’s histories. Even so, his work can serve to remind us of a past in which, for the most part, Muslims and Christians lived together harmoniously and of a time when Muslim hegemony underwrote Christian welfare. This is no mean lesson at a time of ill-advised clamor on the part of some Muslim for “jihad” against the West, and revived Christian anti-Islamic apocalypses, following September 11.

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