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The Uses (and Abuses) of Muslim History in Explaining Islam
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Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia: Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002). (221 pages, including map, index, and bibliography).

One would perhaps not expect a history of "Islamic rule" in the seventh and eighth centuries in what today we call the Middle East to illuminate some of the contemporary debates on Islam, in particular about whether or not there is an innate civilizational clash between it and the (Christian) West. And, yet, this modest study manages to do that, if only tangentially and coincidentally, and if read with some reservations.

The Cambridge historians are renowned for their preoccupation with elites, generally of provinces far removed from the centers of power; hence their single-minded focus on the "politics of notables," albeit of relatively minor localities. From such provincial concerns, however, emerge claims of a more universal sort about, for instance, the nature of British colonial rule in India or, in the present case, "Islamic rule" in the "middle ages." Thus, it is from within the Cambridge tradition that Chase Robinson chooses to assess—as "critic and architect" (1)—the changes that occurred in the status of Christian and Muslim elites following the conquest of Northern Mesopotamia by Muslims.

Implicit in Robinson's argument are three themes: the interrelationship of history and historiography, the effects of the Muslim conquest, and the nature of Islam. I will, therefore, review it thematically as well. I should note at the outset that I engage his work as a generalist, not as a historian, and that I am interested not so much in his re-telling of events as in the political meanings with which he endows them.

(Re)writing history

To reconstruct a past about which there is such a dearth of primary period sources is at best hazardous. For one, where documents such as conquest treaties exist, they have little truth-value, says Robinson. He thus specifies that he is concerned less with their accuracy than with how they were perceived to have governed relations between local Muslims/ imperial authorities on the one hand and Christians on the other. For another, conquest history in fact "describes post-conquest history" (12). Thus, the "conquest past" is a re-presentation of events from a post-conquest present, an exercise in which Christians and

Muslims had an equal stake since the “conquest past could serve to underpin [their] authority alike” (17). Historians then must disentangle events from their own narration, or, at least recognize the ways in which recording events also reframes them.

Fortunately for him, says Robinson, his work was enabled by that of the 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 suggests that it is his rewriting of it that gives al-Azdi’s work (and Muslim historiography of that period generally) the political meanings that it otherwise lacks.

Out of these modest, even inauspicious, beginnings—concerned less with the “truth” of matters than with perceptual realities and reliant on narratives ostensibly devoid of political meanings—nonetheless emerges a self-confident tale about “Islamic rule.”

Muslim Conquest/Rule

It is not until Chapter 2 that Robinson clarifies that “what I have called ‘Islamic rule’ is little more than a trope” (50). However, in what ways it is a trope he never says, leaving one to assume that Islamic and Muslim rule are identical, which of course they are not unless one assumes that everything Muslims do is, by definition, “Islamic.”

In any event, in his telling, “Islamic rule” was for Christians rather benign, in spite of Christian apocalypics. Not only did it allow urban notables to augment their power but also its “primary beneficiary” was the Church, both because Muslims ended Byzantine control over it and because of their own indifference to (on a more generous reading, tolerance of) Christian beliefs. As a result, 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 in the seventh century that saw the “birth of a vibrant church and monastic culture.” It was only after Abbasid rule was imposed from Iraq in the mid-eighth century 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 a negation of Western stereotypes of Islam as having been

everywhere spread by the sword, he ascribes it to the Christian desire for “harmonious coexistence” with the Muslims (15).

What, then, of Christian apocalyptic texts condemning Islam? Robinson locates as their source anxieties generated by “an unprecedented taxation regime” that made conversion attractive, threatening the church’s authority. Thus, for Christians, it was “taxation that signalled Islamic rule,” and some prelates reacted to it by calling “for a last world emperor to protect Christianity” (50). But later, Robinson admits that taxation was “as inefficient in asserting claims of sovereignty (Christians levied taxes on Christians, and appeals for relief were made to Christian authorities) as it was in extracting resources” (95). If this is so, then his explanation of Christian apocalypics becomes less persuasive.

What interests me most about Robinson’s account is its failure to yield up evidence that Muslims persecuted Christians, or anything that suggests the irrevocability of a “clash” between them, or even that early Muslim wars were wars of religion, notwithstanding the claims of individual Muslims to be acting as God’s agents and Robinson’s own views about violence in Islam. Indeed, it is on the last score that he is on the weakest grounds.

Re-presenting Islam

Among Robinson’s observations about Islam is his reference to “Muhammad’s (apparent) marriage of ethnicity and creed” (109), and his claim 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 delinked monotheism from race, ethnicity, culture, bloodlines, and so on, by defining the community (ummah) in terms simply of a distinctive articulation of faith.

More egregiously, 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 shoddy and uninformed scholarship, it is misguided in its attribution to God, and to Islam, of the violence that Muslims thought fit to commit historically. The Qur’an not only does not teach a concept of jihad as war, but it only permits qital, or fighting, for the purpose of defending against religious persecution, not for conquest, expansion, or political aggrandizement. Even the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad does not advocate such wars. Further, the wars that Robinson talks about were civil wars among Muslims, not wars meant to force Islam on nonMuslims; they thus hardly qualify

as holy wars (a term he uses) or as "sacral violence." This is not to say that Muslims did not fight wars of conquest that they then re-presented as religious wars, but as Robinson himself notes of the conquest, its re-presentation in "theocratic terms" was a (later) rationalization (33).

In some ways, little has changed since the seventh century, at least in so far as the (re)interpretation of the conquest past is concerned. Now, as before, both Muslims and Christians remain invested in interpreting this past because it continues to underpin their authority alike. But today, some of us have the hubris of believing that Muslims could only record their past, not endow it with political meaning. It then is left to non-Muslim historians to tell us what was important about it and why. As always, Muslims are to be ventriloquized by nonMuslims.

Even so, and notwithstanding its misrepresentations of Islam and its imperialist claims to authoritative meaning-making, Robinson's history can still serve to remind us of an era in which Muslims and Christians lived together, for the most part, harmoniously. 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 apocalypics, following September 11.

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