



Islam

THE IDEA OF THE MUSLIM WORLD: A GLOBAL INTELLECTUAL HISTORY. By Cemil Aydin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 293. Cloth, \$31.00; paper, \$16.95.

This volume questions the geopolitical construct of an internally unified and monolithic “Muslim world” and how this notion has been used (and misused) to support both Muslim exceptionalism and Islamophobia. Aydin claims that the idea of an imagined global Muslim unity—whether invoked by Muslims or non-Muslims—is misleading and ahistorical. Rather than being united by religious solidarity against an imagined religious and civilizational Other, Aydin argues, rival Muslim dynasties historically have competed among themselves and have alternated between strategic alliances with non-Muslims based on differing interests and political agendas. The author provides copious historical examples to bolster his claims in six marvelous and chronologically organized chapters. These cover the complex political figurations of the multireligious and multiethnic imperial world order of the nineteenth century and the slow waning of imperial logic in the face of rising nationalisms and racialization in the twentieth century. Although the primary argument of the book against essentializing Islam (or stereotyping of any kind, for that matter) is not necessarily new or original, the historical material covered by the author is well-chosen, illustrative and insightful. Aydin’s book provides an urgent alternative to the clash of civilizations narrative with its oversimplified binary of a static and unified “Islamic world” versus an equally monolithic “Christian West”. Especially in times where these essentialist and exclusionary notions seem to be refashioned with renewed political vigor. Instead, it provides a historical tour-de-force with a keen eye for the nuances, complexities and contradictions of geopolitical relations and alliances in an age of religiously and ethnically diverse empires. The book’s ultimate aim is to “decolonize” and “deconstruct” our modern typical notions about religion, civilization, and world order. No doubt more work is needed to achieve this ambitious aim, but this book seems like a step in the right direction. Aydin’s superb historical analysis provides an important contribution to confront essentializing trends in Euro-American discourses—be they scholarly or political—on Muslim migration and Islam. The book is richly sourced for further reading and should be of interest to scholars and students of modern Islamic intellectual history and global history at large.

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SAID THE PROPHET OF GOD HADITH COMMENTARY ACROSS A MILLENNIUM. By Joel Blecher. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 272. Hardcover, \$85; Paperback, \$34.95; Ebook, \$34.95.

Foucault identified the paradoxical nature of commentary, which “must say for the first time what has already been said, and must tirelessly repeat what has never been said.” This

excellent study explores a genre about which much must be said for the first time. Blecher brings nuance and sophistication to the task of examining the vast commentary tradition on the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (the *hadith*). He eschews a narrow focus and instead takes on a whole millennium of social and intellectual practices through a series of meticulously documented case studies. These come from a wide range of time periods and locations (medieval Spain, late-medieval Egypt, and colonial and postcolonial South Asia). He argues that we must understand *hadith* commentary as a social practice that cannot be reductively explained as a competition for resources but must also take into account the ways in which commentators attempt to achieve excellence according to norms internal to the tradition. Although each of his case studies stands on its own as a window into the material, social, textual, and intellectual practices of scholars and their audiences, Blecher artfully weaves the cases together by returning to a limited repertoire of legal and interpretive questions such as the matter of discretionary punishment (*ta’zir*). Thus, even if the litany of names overwhelms, the reader can find a foothold in familiar topics, a strategy that also draws out precisely how new social and political contexts reshaped the stakes of interpretation. The interconnectedness of these case studies bears out Blecher’s contention that *hadith* commentary is a tradition in Talal Asad’s sense, that is, it is constantly relating a past to the present concerns. The temporal and geographic breadth of Blecher’s canvas is supported both by his rigorous textual study and by ethnographic work in both the Middle East and South Asia. His epilogue engages thoughtfully with the use of *hadith* commentary among the proponents of ISIS. This is certainly a foundational study in the field of Islamic social and intellectual history.

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THE CRUCIBLE OF ISLAM. By Glen W. Bowersock. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp 240. Hardback, \$25.00, Paper, \$12.95.

This book by eminent historian Glen Bowersock is an impressive undertaking as it “attempt(s) to expose and describe the complex cultural and social environment that fostered a new religion.” (13) To do so in 159 small (at 4-3/8 × 7-1/8 inches, almost pocket-size) pages, with an additional 30 pages chock-full of endnotes is a feat. Bowersock takes us, in nine chapters, on a tour-de-force of late antiquity, deftly interrogating the interconnections and relations between major and minor Middle Eastern powers to “provide a glimpse into the chaotic environment that made Islam possible.” (9)

Demonstrating expert understanding of the various historical processes at work, not just in the Levant but also the neighboring kingdoms of Axum/Ethiopia, Persia, Rome/Byzantium, and Yemen, Bowersock skillfully leads the reader through the complex Middle Eastern landscape of late antiquity. Equally distrustful of revisionist history and unquestioning acceptance of later Muslim tradition, Bowersock is most original when elaborating on the thesis of his previous