

WHY WE NEED TO STUDY EARLY MUSLIM HISTORY

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

In his Preface to the 1898 edition of his famous *A Short History of the Saracens*, the Rt. Hon. Justice Syed Ameer Ali of Bengal wrote, “Of all the older nations that have carried their arms across vast continents, that have left ineffaceable marks of their achievements on the pages of history, and enriched the world of thought by their discoveries and speculations, the Saracens stand to us the closest in time. Modern Europe is still working with the legacy they left behind, with the intellectual wealth they stored for their successors. It is, therefore, a matter of regret that in the West [the] knowledge of their history should be more or less confined to specialists; whilst in India, a country which was at one time peculiarly subject to the influence of their civilisation, it should be almost unknown. Much of this no doubt is due to the absence of a proper work on the subject.” (p.vii) Despite Ameer Ali’s archaic language and use of obsolete terms (such as ‘Saracens’ instead of ‘Arabs’), his book later inspired Philip K. Hitti, the prominent Lebanese-American historian, to write his acclaimed *History of the Arabs* in 1937. While Ameer Ali’s work traced the history of the Arabs from the pre-Islamic period to the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain, Hitti’s approach was more ambitious as he attempted to provide an overview of Arab history from the earliest period to his own time.

Subsequently, several eminent historians like Sir John Bagot Glubb, M A Shaban and Albert Hourani made important contributions to the study of Arab history and culture in the English language. These scholars and historians, both Muslim and non-Muslim,

devoted their lives to the study of a world civilisation where, in the words of Professor Hourani, “a family from southern Arabia could move to Spain, and after six centuries return nearer to its place of origin and still find itself in familiar surroundings, had a unity which transcended divisions of time and space; the Arabic language could open the door to office and influence throughout that world; a body of knowledge, transmitted over the centuries by a known chain of teachers, preserved a moral community even when rulers changed; places of pilgrimage, Mecca and Jerusalem, were unchanging poles of the human world even if power shifted from one city to another; and belief in a God who created and sustained the world could give meaning to the blows of fate.” (*A History of the Arab Peoples*, p4) Since the origin and development of this unique civilisation is traced back to the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) and the Holy Qur’an, the Divine revelation bestowed on him, no serious study of Arab history in general and Islamic history and culture in particular is possible without a thorough study and analysis of the Prophet’s life and teachings. For this reason, the early Muslims were very keen to record and transmit a wealth of information about the life, career and teachings of the Prophet for the benefit of posterity.

Another reason why the early Muslims took such interest in history and historical information is because they knew that without preserving information about the life of the Prophet, much of the Holy Qur’an and Prophetic *sunnah* (norms and practices), not to mention the teachings of the *sahabah* (Prophet’s companions) and that of their successors (*tabiun*), would not make sense. Why? Because the traditional Islamic sciences (such as the principles of Qur’anic exegesis, sciences of hadith and Islamic jurisprudence, etc) originated and developed in Islamic history and they would not make sense unless they were studied in the historical context in which they were first formulated and evolved. That is why a study of Islamic history in its social, political, economic and intellectual contexts is indispensable for developing a thorough and systematic understanding of traditional Islamic sciences. For this reason some of Islamic history’s leading Qur’anic commentators, traditionists, theologians, jurists and scientists (such as Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq, al-Tabari, al-Bukhari, al-Khwarizmi, Ibn Khaldun and Shah Waliullah) were known to have been prominent historians too. Unlike the Muslims of the past, however, today’s Muslim universities and colleges, not to mention the traditional Islamic seminaries (*madrasahs* and *dar al-*

ulooms) do not pay much attention to the study of Islamic history and culture. As a result, these educational institutions are now producing Islamic scholars (*ulama*) whose knowledge and understanding of Islamic history leaves a lot to be desired. No wonder then the field of Islamic history and culture is now dominated by non-Muslims scholars and historians based at some of Europe's and America's leading universities and colleges.

As it happens, the works of Sir John B. Glubb, Philip Hitti, Marshall Hodgson, Albert Hourani, Bernard Lewis, Clifford Bosworth, Jonathan Bloom and Hugh Kennedy, among others, are today considered to be some of the most invaluable contributions made in the field of Islamic history and culture in the English language to date. Nevertheless, the works of the non-Muslim scholars and historians of Islam can be generally divided into two categories, namely that of the Orientalists who produced their works before the twentieth century and that of the Islamicists who contributed during the twentieth century leading up to the present day. By the same token, it is true that all of the aforementioned non-Muslim historians including Hugh Kennedy, the author of *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live in* (Phoenix, 2008), belong to the latter period because, unlike their predecessors, most of these historians are familiar with Arabic and therefore their works are based on a combination of original Arabic sources as well as works produced in various European languages by modern Western historians of Islam. In the case of Kennedy, he studied Arabic at the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies before pursuing Persian, Arabic and History at Cambridge. He has been teaching medieval history at the University of St Andrews since 1972 and is a prolific writer on early Islamic history and culture.

Prior to this book, he had published *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (1981), *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (1986), *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (1996), *The Armies of the Caliphs* (2001) and *The Court of the Caliphs* (2004), among others. However, in the Preface to this book, Kennedy writes, "I have attempted to give an account of the history of the Arab Muslim conquests of the Middle East and the wider world as they occurred between the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 and the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in 750. The starting date is fairly obvious. Although the roots of the conquests lay in the

policies and actions of Muhammad in his lifetime, it was not until after his death that Muslim armies began to invade lands outside the Arabian Peninsula. The terminal date is more arbitrary, missing out, as it does, on some important conquests - of Sicily and Crete, for example, - but in broad terms, the boundaries of the Muslim world as they were established by 750 remained largely unchanged until the expansion into India around the year 1000.” (p2)

Probably influenced by Sir John B. Glubb (Glubb Pasha)’s book, *The Great Arab Conquests* (1963), which begins with the life of the Prophet and concludes with the death of Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, the first Umayyad ruler in 680, Kennedy’s book however covers the period of the first four Caliphs of Islam and the whole of the Umayyad period, concluding with the overthrow of the latter by the Abbasids in 750. Having read Kennedy’s previous books including his *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, this book appears to be a much larger account of early Islamic expansion although I found the Foreword to the book, consisting of more than 20 pages, to be highly informative and thought-provoking. Comprising of eleven chapters in total and a conclusion, this book (like most of Kennedy’s other works on Islamic history) is essentially a narrative rather than a scholarly history of early Islam and therefore it is more suitable for lay readers even though scholars may find it useful.

In fact, the author’s approach to his subject matter and regard for his sources of information is best summed up by the following comment, “The Arab conquests of the Middle East are among the epoch-making changes in human history. The sources we have for understanding these tumultuous events are hemmed in by many limitations. We cannot always, perhaps ever, find answers to the questions we most want to ask, yet by treating the evidence with respect, and working with it, we can come to a fuller understanding of what was happening.” (p33) Indeed, since the rise and development of Islam as a religion, culture and civilisation took place at a rapid pace, the exploration of its origin and evolution requires great care, a sound knowledge of the original sources as well as some training in historical research methods and techniques. However, this cannot (and will not) happen unless Muslim schools, colleges, universities and Islamic seminaries (madrasahs), both in the UK and around the Muslim world, actively promote the study of early Islamic history to their students and do so in a creative, authoritative and entertaining way. Hopefully this

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will inspire more young Muslims to pursue and undertake research in this very important field of Islamic studies for the benefit of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Finally, despite the obvious care and extensive research which went into producing this useful and informative book, I came across few factual errors which should be rectified in a future edition, namely on page 54 the author says the title of *khalifat Allah* (God's deputy) was conferred on Abu Bakr when, in fact, his title was *khalifat rasul Allah* (successor to the Messenger of God) and on pages 371 and 372 the author wrongly refers to Muhammad ibn al-Qasim al-Thaqifi, the great Muslim conqueror of the Indian province of Sindh, as Muhammad ibn Ishaq. These errors aside, I found this contribution useful and interesting and I have no hesitation in recommending it to others, scholars and students alike.

Muhammad Mojlum Khan is a prolific writer, literary critic and research scholar; he has published more than 100 essays and articles worldwide. He is the author of the acclaimed book, THE MUSLIM 100 and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL. He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain, a Member of English PEN, and a Founding Director of *Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK (BMRI)*.