

Exploring the Origins of Islamic Civilization

***Essays on the Origins of Islamic Civilization*, by Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, Cambridge: MAJ Beg, pp. 312, 2006, PB. £8.99**

Born in Gachahar, Dinajpur, in British India in 1944 and brought up and educated in East Pakistan, Dr Beg obtained his bachelors and masters degrees in Islamic history from Rajshahi University before he proceeded to Christ's College, Cambridge University, where he obtained a doctorate in Middle Eastern history in 1971. He was in England when Pakistan broke up and the eastern wing of the country became known as Bangladesh. With the assistance of late Dr Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din), the famed author of *The Life of Muhammad*, he was able to obtain temporary work at the British Museum in London and in 1972 he became a British citizen. Then he moved to Malaysia where he taught Islamic history at the National University of Malaysia for more than a decade. The essays in the book under review formed part of his introductory lectures on Islamic history and civilization at the National University of Malaysia. Thereafter, he moved to the University of Brunei Darussalam as an Associate Professor of Islamic history and civilization, and lectured there for four years. During this period he authored and edited scores of books and treatises including *Islamic and Western Concepts of Civilization* (1979, reprinted 2006), *Wisdom of Islamic Civilization* (1980, reprinted 2006), *Social Mobility in Islamic Civilization* (1981, reprinted 2006) and *Historic Cities of Asia* (1985) among others.

After teaching for nearly two decades in the Far East, Dr Beg returned to Cambridge in 1990 where he resumed his career as a lecturer and researcher. In addition, he has contributed entries to prominent publications like *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition, Leiden), *Islam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul, Turkey) and *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford, 1995). However, it was Dr Beg's *Brief Lives of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad* (2002, revised edition 2003) which captured my attention. Having already read scores of books on the life and times of the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions (*sahabah*), I found this book very unusual and informative because the author adopted a historical approach to the lives of the *sahabah*. In his foreword to the second edition of the *Brief Lives*, Dr Beg wrote, "A cursory glance at the biographical books written by Islamic scholars between the Second and the Ninth century AH/Eighth to Fifteenth century AD indicates the range of documentation available to modern scholars. Many of these books are, however, deficient in one respect. It would seem that early Islamic biographers did not pay much attention to the chronology of events in the lives of the first Islamic generation. This particular deficiency is also found in some of the preliminary writings on the lives of the Companions which are presently proliferating in various parts of the world" (p6)

The author's historical approach to the lives of the Prophet's companions represents an important shift away from the traditional hagiographical works of both the early and modern Muslim writers about the first Islamic generation. For this reason, the author should consider undertaking a similar approach to the *sirah* (life and times) of the Prophet (pbuh). The need for a modern, critical historical approach to the life and times of the Prophet (pbuh) from an Islamic perspective has been long felt but it was the late Dr Muhammad Hamidullah who came very close to achieving this in his *Le Prophete de l'Islam* (2 vols, Paris, 1959). However, having read most of Dr Beg's books and treatises I feel he is ideally placed to accomplish this important task.

Steeped in traditional Islamic thought and history and also trained in modern methods of research and scholarship, in the book under review, Dr Beg attempts to explore the origins of Islamic civilization in order to identify and examine the historical basis of Islam as a global religion, culture and civilization. In Dr Beg's own words, "The study of Islam, from the theological, historical and sociological point of view, has been attempted by many scholars of diverse backgrounds. Some of these writings are genuine attempts to explain Islam to readers who are not familiar with the subject. Other approaches have been polemical, and some have presented Islam from a cross-cultural perspective. Islam has also been discussed by scholars interested in comparative religion. Each scholarly attempt to present Islam from a new perspective has yielded a new interpretation of Islam. Moreover, each new interpretation can be useful to readers of different backgrounds". (p1) Being a historian by profession, the author pursues a historical-cum-multi-disciplinary approach to analysing the origin and development of Islam as a global religion and civilization. Consisting of nine essays, a synopsis and a short preface, in this book, the author provides a complex but cogent answer to the question: what is the origin of Islam as a religion, culture and civilization?

In the first essay, the author surveys the works of several Western writers on Islam including Humphrey Prideaux, Richard Bell, Charles Torrey and Robert Serjeant, and shows how their theories concerning the origin of Islam does not stand up to serious scrutiny. Although this essay provides a useful survey of Western scholarship on the early Islamic period, a fuller and more comprehensive survey of Western scholarship on the origins of Islam in general and the life and times of the Prophet (pbuh) and the Qur'an in particular has been provided by the late Dr Muhammad Mohar Ali in his *Sirat al-Nabi and the Orientalists* (2 vols, Madina, 1997) and *The Qur'an and the Orientalists* (Ipswich, 2004). These two books should be read along with Dr Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami's *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Riyadh, 1985) and *The History of the Qur'anic Text* (Leicester, 2003) for an exhaustive critique of Western scholarship on the origins of Islam.

The subject of the second essay is the first Islamic State founded by the Prophet (pbuh) in Madina. In this essay the author traces the origins of this first City-State especially in relation to the Constitution of Madina. Since the author is an expert on the lives of the sahabah, he also provides an illuminating and well documented account of those companions who played a pivotal role in consolidating Islam in its early days. Although the historians tend to divide early Islamic history into two periods, namely the era of the first four Caliphs and the Umayyad period, Dr Beg argues the early Islamic history should instead be divided into the era of the Caliphs

who were *sahabah* (that is, from Abu Bakr to Muawiyah) and the period of those Caliphs who were not *sahabah* (that is, from Yazid to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, thus covering the first century of Hijrah). Although this is an interesting suggestion, it is doubtful whether the Islamic scholars and historians would take this suggestion seriously because Muawiyah is largely considered to have been a King rather than a Caliph. The same is true of all the other Umayyad rulers other than perhaps Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz.

By contrast, essays 3, 4, 5 and 6 are titled as follows: 'Equality and Meritocracy in Early Islamic Society', 'Women of Arabia during the First Islamic Century/7th Century AD', 'Menial Labour and Craftsmanship' and 'The Origins of Islamic Cities'. These are some of the most informative essays I have read on the early Islamic period. The author has literally ploughed through the classical Arabic as well as modern sources on the early Islamic period and in so doing he has developed a coherent and most illuminating picture of the early Islamic society. Although the subject matter of essay 3 has been discussed by the author in considerable detail in his *Social Mobility in Islamic Civilization*, this essay nevertheless throws fresh light on the issue of social mobility/stratification in the early Islamic society. Likewise, in essay 4, after analysing the position of women in seventh century Arabia, the author concludes that Islam substantially improved women's position and status throughout the Arabian society.

However, the most unusual and interesting part of this book is essay 6. Since the author obtained his doctorate on the subject of menial labour during the early Abbasid period, it is not surprising that this essay provides a detailed and insightful analysis of different types of professions which existed during the early Islamic period. Dr Beg begins by exploring Islamic attitudes to work, labour, craftsmanship and skill, and then explains how small-scale industries (such as grain-mills, textiles, handicrafts, factories and shipyards) emerged in the Muslim world during the Umayyad period. Thereafter, in essay 6 the author provides an equally enlightening analysis of the origins of early Islamic cities like Makkah, Madina, Basra, Kufa, al-Fustat, Wasit and Baghdad. Some of the information contained in this essay also appears in the authors *Historic Cities of Asia* (Kuala Lumpur, 1985). Unlike the four aforementioned essays, a lot has already been written concerning the subject matter of the remainder of this book, namely the basic features of Islamic art, architecture and science. As such, Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius's *Islam: Art and Architecture* (Knoemann, 2004), Titus (Ibrahim) Burckhardt's *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London, 1976) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London, 1976) and *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, 1987) provide a detailed exploration of the topics covered by Dr Beg in the last three essays of this book.

Nevertheless, I found these essays very useful and informative because the author analyses Islamic art, architecture and science from a historical perspective. Now in his early sixties, the author has spent a lifetime studying and researching Islamic history and culture, and as such this book contains a wealth of historical data, information as well as illuminating discourse on the origins of Islam as a global religion, culture and civilization. Although published by the author himself, I feel this book can be improved further by thoroughly re-editing it. The fonts are too small, the index is very brief and in the bibliography 'idem' appears on pages 300 to 302 instead of the authors names. These minor issues aside, Dr Beg should be congratulated for his

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invaluable contribution to Islamic history and culture. This book can be obtained from Civilization Books (01223 501062).

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