

Book Review

ISLAM IN MODERN RUSSIAN THOUGHT

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

***Mussulman Culture* by V. V. Bartold, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2009,
pp132, £6.99**

Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold was born in 1869 in St. Petersburg and subsequently he graduated from the Faculty of Oriental Languages, University of St. Petersburg, in 1891. In 1901, at the age of thirty-two, he became a professor at the same university where he composed his dissertation entitled *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (1928) which later became his most influential and widely recognised contribution. Bartold also edited the journal of the Russian Society of Oriental Studies and served as director of Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography until 1921. In addition to the book under review, Bartold wrote many other books on the history of Turkistan and Muslim culture including *History of the Cultural Life of Turkistan* (1927) and *Ulugbek and His Times* (1918). After a distinguished academic and literary career, he died in August 1930 while working on a manuscript of a Persian geographer of the tenth century.

As an eminent Russian Orientalist, Bartold's approach to his subject was remarkably free from the usual bias and Euro-centrism that was associated with the Orientalist literature of the time. In his Introduction to V.V. Bartold's *Mussulman Culture* (translated from the Russian by Shahid Suhrawardy) and published by Oxford University Press, Gabriele

Marranci of Aberdeen University wrote, “In his research, Bartold rejected commonly held stereotypes of his time, and through doing so, he problematized what other scholars of the day tried to simplify. A good example of this is his strong refutation, which we shall find expressed also in this present book, *Mussulman Culture*, of the belief that historical events and changes can be explained through one factor: Islam. To appreciate how pioneering and farsighted his work was, we have to understand the historical timeframe in which Bartold was working in Russia, as well as the predominant views about Muslims and Islam. Brower (2003: 110) has provided us with a glimpse into that discussion as follows: ‘General Dukhovskoi had set the tone in 1889 with his hysterical ranting against Muslim solidarity and Turkic cultural activities in the empire. They added up, he predicted, to the spread to Russia of ‘the idea of pan-Islamism’ and of Muslim ‘revenge against European civilization’. The fear that he expressed found a new source of nourishment in the emergence in the late 1900s in Tehran and Istanbul of constitutional movements.’ The Muslims are seen not only a potential enemy, but actually a religious enemy.” (p.xi)

Being familiar with Arabic, Persian and Chinese, not to mention the Caucasian languages, Bartold had access to first hand information about the Muslim world and its intellectual legacies, which enabled him to separate fact from fiction and reality from stereotypes, thereby transcending the problems that had plagued other Russian and European Orientalists of the time. As Sir Hassan Suhrawardy (a former Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University) wrote in his Foreword to 1934 edition of this book, “Many works have been written on Islamic culture but in none do we perceive to such an extent that cultural unity which pervaded the Islamic world. This is due to the fact that until now specific countries have been studied and almost exclusive emphasis has been laid on the contributions of the Arabs and the Persians alone. The role of Islam in Turkestan and the Russian possessions is hardly known to us.” (p.xxiv) Translated from the original Russian by Shahid Suhrawardy (who hailed from the famous Suhrawardy family of West Bengal and was himself an eminent linguist, artist and diplomat), in this small book, Bartold provided a brief but equally engaging overview of the rise and development of Islam as a culture and civilisation.

According to Gabriele Marranci the “*Mussulman Culture* shows how Bartold was ahead of his time in his rejection of what today is termed ethnocentrism. The opening of the Introduction is an interesting discussion of the historical idea of ‘the East’ in which Bartold is able to show how the ‘concept’ of ‘East’ remains rather relative, if not controversial. Yet it is within the concluding words of the Introduction that Bartold has stated what – even more so today, in a post 9/11 world where Islam is sometimes blamed for both world terrorism as well as issues existing in Muslim countries – is essential for any unbiased historical and social scientific study of Muslim societies.” (p.xiv) To Bartold, the idea of the ‘East’ being a world that is different (if not opposed) to the ‘West’ originated during the time of the Roman Empire but such demarcation is no longer valid because the modern world, unlike the ancient and early medieval periods, is the product of multiple influences and identities. So much so that even the “rise and decline of Islamic material culture depends”, argued Bartold, “to a much larger degree on this factor than on the dogmas of Islam as a religion or the racial characteristics of the different Mussulman peoples.” (p.xxxv-xxxvi)

After defining and distinguishing the meaning of ‘Mussulman’ and ‘Arab’ culture as well as ‘East’ ‘Near East’ and ‘Far East’ in relation to cultural interaction and exchange, in chapter 1, the author attempts to show how civilisations do not rise and decline in isolation but rather they are linked and interconnected with the civilisations of the past, present and future. Focusing on the Christian East, its relations to Antiquity, namely Roman and Persian cultures, the author sets the scene for analysing the impact of these two ancient civilisations in relation to the rise and decline of Christian East, which culturally paved the way for the emergence of Islam and the flourishing of Arab culture under the aegis of the Caliphate during the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. As a historian and anthropologist, Bartold analyses the rise and expansion of the Arab world from a multi-disciplinary perspective, refusing to accept a purely religious, historical, ethnocentric or stereotypical explanation for the rise of Islam. His following comment is typical of his intellectual approach: “As is the case with all the aspects of the cultural life of the Mussulmans the type of the Islamic town gradually came into existence as a result

of the mingling of Arab with local traditions. There is no generic type of the Musselman town even at the present day. Some European travellers have attempted to explain the type of the so-called 'oriental' town as resulting from a fear of 'oriental' despotism, a town where the apartments of living are hidden in the interior courtyards and from the streets; except for shops, you can only see palisades. This presupposition is not quite correct since the excavations of Pompeii have proved that this was also the type of the Roman town." (p.15-16)

In chapter 3, the author focuses on the emergence of Baghdad as the centre of Islamic thought, culture and civilisation during eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. In this very short chapter the author argues that Arabic intellectual and cultural contributions of the time were the products of ancient Greek, Babylonian, Syriac, Persian and Indian civilisations as much as they were of Islamic civilisation. Characteristic of Bartold's multi-disciplinary approach, he refuses to give credit to one single religion or culture for the emergence of Islam and the flourishing of Muslim culture. Although Bartold rightly argued that Muslims could not have achieved as much as they did in philosophy, science, mathematics and literature without Greek, Persian and Indian influences, however he overlooked the role played by Islam as a religion and the person of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in the formation of the Islamic worldview and the development of Muslim culture; as such his analysis of the rise and development of Islam as a religion and culture is far from being complete and conclusive. Nevertheless, the author concluded this chapter with some interesting comments on Ibn Khaldun, the great North African Muslim historian, and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain.

In chapters 4 and 5, the author focuses on Persian influence on Muslim culture and how the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century, in turn, influenced Persian culture. Here he explores the contributions of Firdawsi, Ibn Sina, al-Biruni and the historian Rashid al-Din who composed a universal history under Mongol patronage, among others. In the final chapter of the book, Bartold surveyed the history of the Muslim world from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, seeking to find answers to the question: why Islamic civilisation became stagnant and eventually declined? His answer to this question was

that a combination of political, economic, cultural and technological factors triggered the decline of the Muslim world, coupled with the emergence of the European nations. Although originally published in 1918, this small book is still relevant today, not least because it is an extremely thoughtful and informative analysis of Muslim culture and history. The fact that it was written by a distinguished Russian Orientalist who was familiar with Arabic, Persian and other oriental languages makes it an equally interesting work. In the words of Gabriele Marranci, “There may be many ways of reading Bartold’s work, but I think that today, in a world in which increasingly widespread stereotypes represent Islam, Muslim culture and Muslims as backward, violent, irrational and fanatic, *Mussulman Culture* reminds the academic world of the responsibility which we have in fighting such stereotypes... Today, more than ever before, we need to rethink how we represent and describe what for Bartold was the ‘Mussulman Culture’ . (p.xx) This book is a very brief but a useful and interesting account of the rise, development and decline of Muslim culture spanning more than thirteen centuries. Recommended reading for those interested in Muslim thought, culture and history.

Muhammad Mojlum Khan has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide. He is a research scholar, literary critic and author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Muslim 100* (reprinted 2010; Kindle 2011), and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming); his writings have been translated into several languages. He is a founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK (BMRI) and editor of its website.