Introduction

The religion of Islam, revealed to Muhammad in 610, has shaped the cultural, religious, ethical, and scientific heritage of many nations. Some contemporary historians argue that there is substantial proof in the historical record of Muhammad’s existence as a man, while what is known about the life of Jesus is exclusively derived from the scriptures of the Christian Church. Therefore they consider Muslim primary sources to be more reliable than Christian ones. Compared to the reality of Muhammad, Jesus is a mythical figure. Arnold Toynbee explains:

The sources for the study of Islamic history, from Muhammad’s lifetime onwards, are copious, and many of them are of first-rate value from the historian’s professional point of view. Muhammad’s career, unlike Jesus’s, can be followed point by point — and, in some of its chapters, almost day by day — in the full light of history. But these valuable historical records are all in Arabic; and this pulls up short the Western historian who has been following the history of South-West Asia and Egypt in Greek and Latin records over a span of nearly twelve hundred years… (Toynbee, 464)

Since the 1960s, Western scholars have made considerable effort to translate and analyze these Arabic primary sources.

Prophet Muhammad’s political success was spectacular! Muhammad extended his power from the city-state of Madīna over all the Arabian Peninsula and in Transjordan. Even after his death, the Muslim Empire rapidly expanded over the whole of the Sāsānian Persian Empire and into Syria and Egypt (previously part of the Roman Empire). In a very short time span, the Islamic State covered vast territories and various populations. Islam’s impact on world history is as impressive as the legacy of Judaism and Christianity. Islam contributed to the religious, artistic, and intellectual renaissance of these conquered people. Islam was not imposed by force; the process of conversion was gradual over a period of six centuries, but never complete. Even now there are substantial Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian minorities who survived due to the Islamic policy of toleration toward the non-Muslim People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb), founded on Muhammad’s example and the Qur’ān. Even the Jews, during the Middle Age, recognized the fact that Muslims were more tolerant than Christians.
At first, Western scholarship often depreciated Islam due to Christian prejudice against Islam. Since the 1960s, Western scholars have made detailed studies of the history of Islam, the Qurʾān, the hadīth(s), Islamic law, theology, philosophy, and Sufism. Great Western scholars (Theodor Noldeke, Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph, Schacht, Régis Blachère, Marshall Hodgson, Philippe Hitti, Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, Guy Monnot, Henry Corbin, Wilfred Madelung, Arthur Arberry, Reynold A Nicholson, and others) wrote valuable works improving the image of Islam. They have examined the faith of Islam from their critical and scholarly viewpoint.

The critical study of the very thorough traditional biography has shown that many of the details in question were suspected to have been forged for tendentious purposes (with plenty of art for that matter), one or two centuries after the event. We must never forget that the oldest biographies of the Prophet date from the early IXth century, two centuries after the events. It is true that they have used older compilations that had been preserved in writing or memory. They cite as sources some oral traditions with their chain (isnad) of transmitters going back to the time of the events. But we have no guarantee of the fidelity of transmission or even its reality. We cannot completely exclude the content reported by these written or oral traditions, but we cannot rely blindly on their presentation of history without being critical. One source is probably true, the Qurʾān, which is considered by Muslims, to be the authentic words of God dictated to Muhammad. But its text is in great disorder. We can only uncover with much difficulty and uncertainty the chronological order of events, because those relating to Muhammad’s biography are mentioned in an allusive way. It is therefore a difficult source to use.

The oldest classic biographies are those of Ibn Ishāq, whom we know only through the abridged adaptation of Ibn Hishām (d. circa 219/834); that of Wāqidī (d. 207/822) relating the campaigns of the Prophet, that of his secretary Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845), and finally that of the historian Tabarī (d. 225/923), who used only earlier sources. Occasionally, earlier information of value was transmitted by intermediaries into later works. A careful review of the sources is necessary.

Can we, as Westerners, understand Islam and respect its adherents without compromising our own traditions? I believe it is possible for Westerners to understand
the Islamic viewpoint. But this requires a great effort. First Westerners must learn to set aside their prejudices about the Islamic world and they must make a conscious effort to see what is actually there. They have to develop their capacity to see Islam objectively and increase their empathy toward the Muslim world by identifying themselves with Muslim experience.

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, more and more we need books that explain the Muslim viewpoint. As the conflict between Israel and Palestine and the Iraq war persist, we must discover what the root of the problem is. These conflicts are driven by Western politics which mainly want to control the oil market. These struggles have nothing to do with the faith of Islam. The Muslim world is tremendously diverse culturally, economically, and theologically. Islam is not a monolithic civilization. Islam should not be limited to the Middle East, since the majority of Muslims come from Southeast Asia.

There is substantial misperception in much of the Western World about Islam, in part due to the current political climate. However, if we study the real nature of Islam by carefully reading primary sources, we discover that there is nothing fundamentally different—nothing fundamentally contradictory, nothing that creates conflict—between the Christian and Muslim worlds. In order to comprehend the sameness of their roots, we have to understand the Muslim concept of the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb, i.e. Jews and Christians) of Allāh sending the same revelation to all men, through His Prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad).

The Western misperception of Islam can be attributed to many causes, but I believe that it comes mainly from the fact that many non-Muslims are unable to grasp the Muslim viewpoint about Muhammad and Islam. Therefore the purpose of my book is to present how Muslims belonging to various schools portray Islam. This book presents a brief survey of Islamic history and the beliefs of different schools. The first chapter presents how Muhammad’s life as Prophet and Statesman represents, for Muslims, the Islamic ideal of human life. The second chapter describes the power struggle and the state of civil war between different Muslim parties following the death of the Prophet. The third chapter gives a brief survey of Islamic history until the present time. The fourth
chapter attributes the decline of Islam to various causes (political, intellectual, scientific, economic, and colonization). The fifth chapter presents some questions related to modern times. It portrays the life of two Muslims, al-Afghānī and Muhammad ʿAbduh, who had a tremendous influence on present Islamic trends. It explains the complexity of the contemporary scene due to the fact that there are various types of terrorists. A section of the chapter is devoted the place of women in Islam. The sixth chapter analyses critically the nature and the content of the Qurʾān while presenting it as a source of guidance for Muslims. The seventh chapter presents different schools and fundamental concepts used in the field of Islamic law and Islamic theology. The eighth chapter portrays the history and some essential concepts of two major branches of Shiʿism: Twelver Shiʿites and Ismāʿīlīs. The ninth chapter explains how Hellenic philosophy and the Qurʾān influenced the philosophical tradition of Islam. It describes how Shiʿites particularly advocate the philosophical tradition while giving a historical survey of some great Islamic philosophers. The tenth chapter shows the influence of the Qurʾān, of Muhammad’s sayings and his Night Journey on the Sufi tradition of Islam. It provides a historical survey of some great Sufis and of a few Sufi Orders. Most introductory books on Islam do not cover the debate between Sunnīs and Shiʿites regarding the succession of Muhammad, nor devote an entire chapter on Shiʿī Islam and on Islāmic Philosophy. By covering these topics, my book is certainly more complete than other books in the field.

Many books have been written about Islam. The books written by Western scholars give a critical and an external point of view from a non-believer’s perspective on Muhammad and Islam. These scholars tend to present only the Sunnī version of Islam. Most books written by Muslims about Muhammad generally also give only the Sunnī viewpoint. My research breaks new ground in the field, because I present in a critical manner the way many Muslims belonging to different schools of Islam (Sunnīs, Shiʿītes, theologians, Islāmic philosophers, and Sufis) perceive and understand Islam. My book reveals the plurality of Islam, showing how Islam is portrayed by different communities of interpretation and spiritual affiliation, from century to century, in diverse cultural environments. It is my hope that my book will help to correct Western misperceptions, by revealing how Islam is understood by diverse Muslim communities.
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