

Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia

Chase F. Robinson

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 221 pages.

Perhaps one would not expect a history of “Islamic rule” in the seventh and eighth centuries in what is now the Middle East to illuminate any contemporary debate on Islam, in particular about whether there is an innate civilizational clash between it and the (Christian) West. And yet this modest study manages to do that, if only tangentially and coincidentally, and if read with some reservations.

Cambridge historians are renowned for their preoccupation with elites, generally of provinces far removed from the centers of power, and hence their single-minded focus on the “politics of notables” of relatively minor localities. From such provincial concerns, however, emerge more universal claims about, for instance, the nature of British colonial rule in India or of Islamic rule in the Middle Ages. Chase Robinson, following this tradition, assesses – as “critic and architect” – the changing status of Christian and Muslim elites following the Muslim conquest of northern Mesopotamia.

Three themes are implicit: the interrelationship of history and historiography, the effects of the Muslim conquest, and the nature of Islam. Thus, I will review it thematically as well. I should point out that I engage his work as a generalist, not as a historian, and that I am interested not so much in his retelling of events as in the political meanings with which he endows them.

(Re)writing History. To reconstruct a past about which there is such a dearth of primary period sources is at best hazardous. For one, where documents such as conquest treaties exist, they have little truth-value, says Robinson. He thus specifies that he is concerned less with their accuracy than with how they were perceived to have governed relations between local Muslims/imperial authorities, on the one hand, and Christians on the other. For another, conquest history in fact “describes post-conquest history.” Thus the “conquest past” is a re-presentation of events from a post-conquest present, an exercise in which Christians and Muslims had an equal stake since the “conquest past could serve to underpin [their] authority alike.” Historians then must disentangle events from their own narration, or at least recognize the ways in which recording events also reframes them.

Fortunately for him, says Robinson, his work was enabled by that of al-Azdi, a tenth-century Muslim historian. However, even as he admits that

writing “a history of Mosul might fairly be called re-writing al-Azdi,” Robinson suggests that his rewriting gives al-Azdi’s work (and Muslim historiography of that period generally) the political meanings that it otherwise lacks. Out of these modest, even inauspicious, beginnings – concerned less with the “truth” of matters than with perceptual realities and reliant on narratives ostensibly devoid of political meanings – nonetheless emerges a self-confident tale about “Islamic rule.”

Muslim Conquest/Rule. It is not until chapter 2 that Robinson clarifies that “what I have called ‘Islamic rule’ is little more than a trope.” But he never explains why this is the case, leaving one to assume that Islamic and Muslim rule are identical, which of course they are not, unless one assumes that everything Muslims do is, by definition, “Islamic.”

In any event, in his telling, “Islamic rule” was rather benign for Christians, despite Christian apocalypics: it allowed urban notables to augment their power and its “primary beneficiary” was the Church, for Muslims ended Byzantine control and were indifferent to (on a more generous reading, tolerant of) Christian beliefs. As a result, the Church gained “autonomy from the state, but it lost its only rival (also the state) for the services of privileged families. The result was a hardy and durable Christian identity that was symbolised by Church authorities, many of whom wrote their community’s past.” Church building proceeded apace in the seventh century, which saw the “birth of a vibrant church and monastic culture.” Only after the Abbasids imposed their rule in the mid-eighth century did “some restrictions began to appear.”

As for the conquest itself, Robinson notes that some Christian accounts say that the Christians “willingly handed their city [Mosul] to the Muslims” and that there is no “example of detailed battle narrative” by Christian writers; instead, there are “examples of negotiated settlement.” However, instead of considering this a negation of western stereotypes of Islam being spread by the sword, he ascribes it to the Christian desire for “harmonious coexistence” with the Muslims.

What, then, of Christian apocalyptic texts condemning Islam? Their source, according to Robinson, is the anxiety generated by “an unprecedented taxation regime” that made conversion attractive and so threatened the Church’s authority. Thus, for Christians, it was “taxation that signalled Islamic rule,” and some prelates reacted by calling “for a last world emperor to protect Christianity.” But later, Robinson admits that taxation was “as inefficient in asserting claims of sovereignty (Christians levied taxes on Christians, and appeals for relief were made to Christian authorities) as it

was in extracting resources.” If this is so, his explanation of Christian apocalypticism becomes less persuasive.

What interests me most about Robinson’s account is its failure to yield any evidence that Muslims persecuted Christians, anything that suggests an irrevocable “clash” between them, or even that early Muslim wars were wars of religion, notwithstanding individual Muslim claims of acting as God’s agents and Robinson’s own views about violence in Islam. Indeed, it is on the last score that he is on the weakest grounds.

(Re)presenting Islam. Among Robinson’s observations about Islam is his reference to “Muhammad’s (apparent) marriage of ethnicity and creed” and his claim that the caliphs’ reluctance to promote “the most powerful of all methods of political integration – conversion – says more about the extraordinary persuasiveness of Muhammad’s fusion of ethnicity and monotheism than it does about their enthusiasm for empire building.” Clearly, if Robinson knew anything about Islam, he would know that Islam delinked monotheism from race, ethnicity, culture, bloodlines, and so on, by defining the community (*ummah*) in terms simply of a distinctive articulation of faith.

More egregiously, he asserts that “Islam seems to have meant jihad and conquest led by commanders and caliphs, themselves instruments of God’s providential will” and that God has made “sacral violence ... incumbent upon all Muslims.” This is not just shoddy and uninformed scholarship, but is misguided in its attribution to God and Islam of the violence that Muslims thought fit to commit historically. The Qur’an does not teach jihad as war, but permits only *qital* (fighting) to prevent religious persecution, not for conquest, expansion, or political aggrandizement. Even the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad does not advocate such wars. Further, the wars discussed were inter-Muslim civil wars, not wars to force Islam on non-Muslims. Thus they hardly qualify as holy wars (a term he uses) or as “sacral violence.” Muslims did fight wars of conquest and later on re-presented them as religious wars, but as Robinson himself notes of the conquest, its re-presentation in “theocratic terms” was a (later) rationalization.

In some ways, little has changed since the seventh century, at least insofar as the (re)interpretation of the conquest past is concerned. Now, as before, both Muslims and Christians remain invested in interpreting this past because it continues to underpin their authority. But today, some of us have the hubris of believing that Muslims could only record their past, not endow it with political meaning. Thus, non-Muslim historians must tell us what was important about it and why. As always, Muslims are to be ventriloquized by non-Muslims.

Even so, and notwithstanding its misrepresentations of Islam and its imperialist claims to authoritative meaning-making, Robinson's history reminds us of an era during which Muslims and Christians lived together and, for the most part, harmoniously. This is no mean lesson at a time, following 9/11, of revived Christian apocalypticism as well as the ill-advised clamor by some Muslims for a jihad against the West.

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Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism

John K. Cooley

Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000. 299 pages.

Reading this book is a lot like trying to eat undercooked meat – there is protein in there, but it is flavorless and tedious. You can chew and chew, but you just cannot bring yourself to swallow it. The author presents his case with an authoritative tone, stuffing each paragraph with names, dates, and historical data, but a closer look reveals the use of manipulative language that strings together half-truths and repeated insinuations with conclusions that do not directly relate to the given evidence. The “Acknowledgements” mention that the author has important friends in media and politics, yet his credentials (e.g., for whom he is working, or what his political motivations are) are not given. This is a serious weakness.

Even more serious is his clear contempt for Islam, for he makes no genuine distinction between Muslims' desire for self-rule based upon their belief system (often called “Islamism”) and terrorism. The CIA's use of Muslim lives to advance American corporate interests is taken for granted, while Muslims are portrayed as untrustworthy imbeciles or ungrateful servants. Such mainstream and moderate organizations and intellectuals as Tablighi Jamaat, Jamaat Islami, Maududi of Pakistan, and Hassan al-Turabi of Sudan are given as examples of dangerous extremism. American terrorism against Iraq, Sudan, and Afghanistan, and its support of Israel, are unquestioned as being justified, noble, and necessary, while any attack on western interests or American lives is described with emotionally loaded terms. The only serious criticism of the United States is that it ever trusted Muslims as allies.