

consultation, is the procedure. The ongoing reconstruction of shari'as as Islamic normativity has to rest on a continuous effort to apply harmoniously the procedure to the principle. The result is a procedural, yet normatively grounded, search for consensus that is different from the Western liberal one, yet that nonetheless fits the requirements of democracy. In the final analysis, Mousalli concludes, the Islamic state is "the symbol of collective self-awareness and the possibility of a relatively correct textual understanding" (p. 180).

This book is recommended to all those interested in overcoming conventional and simplified views of the political discourse of Islamism. Its line of argumentation is convincing and, at crucial points, powerful. Its major limitation is in the exclusively textual approach to the discourse of leading thinkers. After all, the main impact of Islamist leaders on Muslim publics is increasingly achieved through electronic media. Even not-so-young personalities like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is a regular guest on Arab satellite TV stations, and Mustafa Mahmud, a hero of Egyptian TV, would be more representative of how Islamist discourse is produced and circulates. Al-Qaradawi and Mustafa Mahmud are popular (and politically influential in spite of the political minimalism they display) exactly because their discourse (or script) is not only edifying, but also entertaining. The analysis of such personalities would also be needed in order not to subscribe to the image (that Moussalli's book seems to accept passively) that the superior morality of Islamist discourse (and the "gate of Baghdad")¹ are besieged by the "media Mongols" of Western-centered, futile global mass culture. Are the stars of Muslim publics, such as al-Qaradawi and Mustafa Mahmud, media Mongols *within* the gates of Baghdad? They are probably only more familiar (and publicly influential) incarnations of Islamist ideology than intellectually prominent thinkers like al-Banna, Qutb, and al-Turabi.

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1. This view is presented in Akbar S. Ahmed, "Media Mongols at the Gate of Baghdad," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1993), pp. 10-18.

Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing, by Fred M. Donner. Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1998. xv + 358 pages. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Muhammad Qasim Zaman

This work represents a major contribution to early Islamic historiography and historical thought. It is an ambitious enterprise that seeks to understand the circumstances in which, and the reasons for which, the early Muslims began to write historical works, and attempting a major revision of the existing scholarship on this complex and contentious subject.

The beginnings of Arab historical writing have often been attributed to an "innate historical curiosity," a "natural" desire to think and write about the past. This simplistic view is not acceptable to Donner, however, any more than is the assumption that the influence of neighboring cultures, which already had highly developed historiographical traditions, must have led to the emergence of historical thought among the Arabs. Donner argues that the Qur'an is profoundly ahistorical in its view of the world; and that early Muslims were so preoccupied with questions of piety and, indeed, with eschatology, that it is anything but obvious that they should innately possess or necessarily develop an interest in historical narration, that is, in "the conscious effort to explain a specific human situation by relating how it resulted from a sequence of earlier events" (p. 96). The case for foreign borrowing is likewise unconvincing, since some need from within the community must usually arise before an idea or institution from the outside can become sufficiently attractive to be adopted.

So what led, then, to the emergence of historical writing in the first century of Islam—the period of "Islamic origins"—leading, as it eventually did, to a highly sophisticated historiographical tradition? The answer, Donner argues, lies in the need of the early "Believers" (a term he prefers to "Muslims" for much of the first century) to articulate an increasingly precise identity as a separate religious community. The articulation of this identity took place both in the context of debates with members of the other communities the Believers encountered in the Middle East after the Arab conquests, as well as through

debates and disputes initiated by political crises *within* the ranks of the Believers. Debates over identity underlie themes such as prophecy, community, leadership, and hegemony, all of which Donner takes to be among the earliest major concerns of Arabic historical writing.

Explaining why a historical interest developed at all is, however, not the only task Donner sets for himself in this stimulating book. He is equally interested in explaining how the historical narratives evolved, why they took the form in which they have come down to us, and how their reliability is to be assessed. He provides an extensive and very helpful review of the major modern Western approaches to the study of Islamic historiography, but it is with what he calls the "sceptical approach" that he is most extensively engaged throughout this study. The "sceptical approach," best typified by the work of Patricia Crone, denies that *any* authentic reconstruction of Islamic origins is possible, at least on the basis of the Arabic-Muslim sources. As Crone has put it, for example, "the religious tradition of Islam is...a monument to the destruction rather than the preservation of the past" (cited in Donner, p. 26, fn. 66). Donner responds, *inter alia*, by positing a distinction between "information" about the past, based on people's recollections of important events, and the "historicization" of these recollections whereby they were made part of varied (and often contradictory) historical narratives. Information about the past could exist and be passed on even when an overarching historical framework, and, indeed, any particular interest in history itself, did not yet exist. The construction of narratives about the past, on the other hand, clearly presupposes, and testifies to, the emergence of a genuine historical interest. The fact that the "information" is now embedded—typically in the form of discrete and usually fairly short reports (*akhbar*)—in longer narratives of a later provenance does not disqualify their historical value; indeed, the fact, Donner argues, that for all the marked divergences on the interpretation of the events of early Islam, there is a remarkable consensus on the historicity of the events themselves demonstrates the credibility of the Muslim sources: "The consensus exists because events actually did happen in the way described by our sources..." (p. 289).

Donner's position on the validity of information about the first generations of Islam will seem too optimistic to the proponents of the "sceptical approach," who will probably continue to affirm that the (later) narrative structures condition all information so thoroughly as to make any credible retrieval of it highly unlikely, if not impossible. Some of Donner's interpretations rest, moreover, on hypotheses whose implications, though vigorously argued, are not always altogether certain. He argues, as already noted, that what the earliest Believers were concerned about was their piety and salvation, not historical thought; indeed, he notes on several occasions that the Prophet Muhammad expected the imminent end of the world.¹ Yet, the eschatological hypothesis fails to explain Muhammad's concern with community formation and the regulation of matters of social life (consider, for instance, the highly detailed Qur'anic injunctions which form the basis of the Islamic law of inheritance). He does make a powerful case for the early Believers' preoccupation with piety and salvation. But the idea that it was *because* of such preoccupation (rather than due to any other combination of plausible factors) that the Believers initially didn't care much for history, tends more often to be assumed than demonstrated throughout this study.²

1. Donner seems to be basing this hypothesis on M.J. Kister, "'A Booth like the Booth of Moses...': A Study of an Early *Hadith*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25 (1962), pp. 150–55; cf. Donner, p. 46. Yet, unlike Kister, he does not limit Muhammad's expectation of an imminent end of the world to his earliest years in Madina (cf. Kister, *ibid.*, p. 155), but rather takes it to be true of Muhammad's worldview in general. Also cf. S.D. Goitein, "The Birth-Hour of Muslim Law," in *idem. Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 126–34, who argues that Muhammad's attitude toward matters of the law underwent a significant change during his middle years in Medina, as reflected in a growing concern of the Qur'an with matters of a legal content. It is difficult to make much sense of such legal materials on Donner's hypothesis. (Goitein's work does not appear in Donner's bibliography.)

2. The "piety" hypothesis is called upon for heavy duty throughout this book. For example, it is in its terms that Donner explains the notorious problems with the chronology of early Islamic accounts; matters of chronology he takes to be a later development, only after a clearly historical interest had emerged. Also, it is evidently to stress the early Believers' preoccupation with piety that Donner translates the term *fuqaha*

This book offers, nevertheless, a rich array of highly stimulating ways of thinking about early Islamic history and historiography. It places on a new level of sophistication the continuing debate about the possibility of retrieving genuine historical information about the Islamic origins from the admittedly later narratives in which it is embedded, and represents as such the most serious challenge yet to the "sceptical approach."

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Recent Publications

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCE

Libraries and Information in the Arab World: An Annotated Bibliography, compiled by Lokman I. Meho and Mona A. Nsouli. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999. xi + 288 pages. Author index to p. 298. Title index to p. 330. Subject index to p. 349. \$79.50. This bibliography, covering the period 1977-98, is a compilation of published works on libraries and information centers of all types throughout the Arab world. This is a potentially valuable resource for librarians, information specialists, library and information science students, educators, and researchers, as well as policy-makers. Over 1,000 items are included in this bibliography, ranging from books, scholarly and professional journal articles, and book chapters, to doctoral dissertations, conference papers, and expert reports. Although most of the entries are in Arabic, English, and French, a few are in German, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, and Italian. This volume is divided into a general section, a section on the Gulf region, and sections on each of the countries of the Arab world. (LP)

The Middle East Military Balance 1999-2000, ed. by Shlomo Brom and Yiftah Shapir. Cambridge, MA: 2000. 412 pages. Charts and tables to p. 425. Gloss. of weapons systems to p. 477. Notes on contris. to p. 479. \$37.50. This work is the latest edition of an annual

(normally "jurists") as "holy men," a rendering which threatens to divest both the notion of the late antique "holy man" (as articulated by Peter Brown and others) as well as the terms *fiqh* and *fuqaha'* of their more specific connotations.

Annotations were prepared with the assistance of Katherine T. Creecy, Leila Piran, Alexander Rueck, and Max Vielle.

series prepared by the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies. In the introduction, the editors discuss the military challenges and political changes in the region during the past decade. Part One consists of chapters which examine the "qualitative dimensions" of the regional balance of land, air, and naval forces; trends in Middle Eastern defense expenditures; and terrorism. Part Two details the military forces of 21 Middle Eastern states—from Algeria to Yemen. Part Three contains an array of charts and tables, while Part Four consists of a comprehensive glossary of weapons systems. (AR)

IRAN

Iran: Comment Sortir d'une Revolution Religieuse, by Farhad Khosrokhavar and Olivier Roy. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999. 282 pages. Bibl. n.p. This book, whose title in English is "Iran: How to Exit a Religious Revolution," examines the state of the Iranian Revolution two decades after the creation of its new order. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the authors argue, Islam itself has been "profoundly transformed by this experience of extreme politicization. If the political has been seized by the religious, the reverse is even more true." (pp. 8-9) This secularization of Islam, Khosrokhavar and Roy argue, in effect returned most issues to the sphere of politics, opening the door for democracy and other developments. Far from becoming irrelevant, Islam continues to be the central theme in the national debate over cultural identity and relations with the West. According to the authors, a growing number of Iranians no longer considers Islam to be the *exclusive* component of their culture, but rather regards it as the *central* element in a wider historical and sociological heritage that defines their nation. Given this understanding, cultural relations with the West may continue to change from ideologically adversarial, to a more open form of communication between two admittedly different cultures. (MV)

The Future Held Captive by the Past, by Abdul G. Mirzani. (in Persian). Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998. 522 pages. \$15. This book presents numerous articles and editorial pieces that critically examine the reasons why, despite revolution and political upheaval, the Iranian people have failed to uproot authoritarian rule and create a democratic, law abiding society. Before responding to this broad question, Mirzani first examines the geopolitical, historical, economic, and cultural obstacles to the establishment of democratic rule in Iran. Although Mirzani argues that imperialist domination is responsible for Iran's social and cultural backwardness, he holds the oppressive ruling élites accountable for allowing foreign powers to take advantage of Iran's natural resources and to interfere in its internal affairs. Mirzani believes that cultural, political, and economic development in Iran can occur only if political institutions are run by people who are deeply committed to the rule of law, rather than to favoritism and patronage. (LP)