

# Editorial – Islamic history as global history

In 1993, Richard Eaton suggested that Islam was ‘history’s first truly global civilization’.<sup>1</sup> All the contributors to this special issue follow in his wake in one sense, in that they seek to rescue the history of Islam from a persistent bias in favour of its Arab and Near Eastern core, which relegates other Islamic lands to the status of a set of peripheries. Contributing to this bias have been the sacred status of the Arabic language, and the prominent role of the holy cities of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Global historians, in contrast, are prone to stress the universal aspects of Islamic history. Indeed, global historians are particularly interested in the complex relations of the ‘abode of Islam’ with the ‘abode of war’, that is the lands not under Muslim rule.<sup>2</sup>

Amira Bennison, following in the footsteps of Marshall Hodgson, later suggested that Islam’s contribution to global history fell into three phases, which roughly coincided with the familiar medieval, early modern, and modern eras. The forces driving ‘archaic globalization’ in the medieval world were primarily associated with Islam from the seventh century of the Common Era, despite a brief Mongol interruption. In early modern times, the age of ‘proto-globalization’, Christian Europe took the initiative, opening up the New World and seizing control of the oceans. However, this remained a tri-polar world, in which Islamic and East Asian ‘gunpowder empires’ were still serious contenders for global hegemony. Only in the period of ‘modern globalization’ did Islam succumb to the West, hesitating between embracing the new order and undermining it with the weapons of the weak.<sup>3</sup>

Although the rise of Islam was undoubtedly a highly significant moment in global history, the extent to which it constituted a rupture with the past remains debatable. Originating from the oasis margins of three great agrarian empires, Byzantium, Persia and Ethiopia, Muslims were unusually prone to borrowing from these peoples. To the initial pot-pourri of neighbouring cultures, they gradually added yet more elements, as the Islamic world came to stretch from the Atlantic to China. Amira Bennison reminds us in her article here that many Muslims consciously saw themselves as heirs to preceding civilizations, in part because Muhammad had come to set the seal on the messages delivered by earlier prophets,

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- 1 Richard M. Eaton, ‘Islamic history as global history’, in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European expansion; the forging of a global order*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, p. 12.
  - 2 Patrick O’Brien, ‘Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history’, *Journal of Global History*, 1, 1, 2006, pp. 19–23.
  - 3 Amira K. Bennison, ‘Muslim universalism and Western globalization’, in A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in world history*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002, pp. 73–98; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The venture of Islam; conscience and history in a world civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

illustrating this through the Andalusí claim to the Roman and Gothic inheritance of Iberia. Hayrettin Yücesoy, in his contribution, focuses on the re-emergence of Persian notions in and around Iraq from the ninth century. He argues that writers in this vein wrote Persian-centred and secular forms of universal history, making a serious but neglected contribution to Islamic historiography.

Whatever the extent of continuities from the pre-Islamic past, the advent of Islam rapidly and durably tightened the bonds between different parts of the medieval Old World. The Islamic oecumene, to use Hodgson's terminology, was geographically superbly positioned to intensify commercial contacts by land and sea.<sup>4</sup> Within the 'abode of Islam', the inspirational institution of the pilgrimage ensured a constant exchange of ideas and practices among Muslims from all corners of the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup> The results were spectacular. By systematically experimenting with plants and cultivation techniques, Muslims engendered an 'agricultural revolution'.<sup>6</sup> They refined and developed the findings of Indian mathematics, Babylonian astronomy, Greek philosophy, and other traditions, laying the foundations for the scientific revolution.<sup>7</sup> As Nelly Hanna shows in her article, Muslims, having learned how to make paper from China, initiated profound transformations in literacy, which later passed to the West.

In addition to these peaceful achievements, Islam also turned to war to implement universal religious and political aspirations. Although forceful conversion was strictly prohibited, Muslims insistently called on all the 'sons of Adam', and by implication the daughters of Eve, to submit to the will of God.<sup>8</sup> In part to facilitate conversion, many Muslims believed that they were under an obligation to impose the supremacy of the holy law across the globe, through holy war if necessary. That said, consensus over holy war was never achieved, with some Muslims arguing for a defensive application of the term.<sup>9</sup> The rise of Sufi mysticism complicated the situation yet further, partly because Sufis were more inclined to pacifism, and partly because they became the chief peaceful missionaries in foreign lands.<sup>10</sup>

In practice, Muslim relations with unbelievers were much more complex and contradictory than any binary model. This point is illustrated in Amira Bennison's article, where she notes the tradition of accepting an 'abode of truce', intermediate between the abodes of

4 Xavier de Planhol, *L'Islam et la mer; la mosquée et le matelot, VIIIe–XXe siècle*, Paris: Perrin, 2000; Hodgson, *The venture of Islam*.

5 Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, eds., *Muslim travellers; pilgrimage, migration, and the religious imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

6 Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural innovation in the early Islamic world; the diffusion of crops and farming techniques, 700–1100*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

7 Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and science*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2002; C. A. Qadir, *Philosophy and science in the Islamic world*, London: Routledge, 1990.

8 Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period; an essay in quantitative history*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979; Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979.

9 Rudolph Peters, *Islam and colonialism; the doctrine of jihad in modern history*, The Hague: Mouton, 1979; Majid Khadduri, *War and peace in the law of Islam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955.

10 Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke, eds., *Islamic mysticism contested; thirteen centuries of controversies and polemics*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Islam and war. She also points to servile concubines and free wives as neglected but vital conduits for powerful external influences at the very heart of Islamic life. A similar tension between theology and reality emerges when one considers apostasy from Islam, for which the legal penalty was death.<sup>11</sup> Már Jónsson's piece shows that the Moriscos officially converted to Christianity in Spain, and yet suffered little discrimination when they were expelled to North Africa and resumed their Islamic identity, probably because it was realized that their 'apostasy' was merely a form of dissimulation, allowing them to continue practising Islam in secret.

The 'rise of the West' has routinely been blamed for challenging Islam's global supremacy in early modern times, and yet it has often been forgotten that Muslims suffered increasingly serious reverses at the hands of non-Western societies. Scott Levi's article shows how Mongols, whether Animist or Tibetan Buddhist by faith, harassed Muslims in Inner Asia long after the passing of the great days of the Mongol empire. He further notes how China subjected the Muslims of East Turkistan (Xinjiang) from the seventeenth century, a situation that has lasted to our own day. In a similar vein, Southeast Asian believers suffered severely at the hands of Confucian Vietnamese, Theravada Buddhist Thais and Burmese, and Hindu Balinese, while South Asia's proud Mughal empire succumbed to blows originating as much from Hindus and Sikhs as from the East India Company. Eastern Orthodox Ethiopian Christians also gradually reversed many of the sixteenth-century conquests of Ahmad the Left-Handed in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Islam's ability to convert subject peoples began to wane in early modern times, allowing protected 'people of the book' (*dhimmi*) to rise to ever greater prominence, notably in the Balkans and South Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Early modern Islamic decline thus involved more than a simple inability to keep up with the West, and yet it remained partial, and its causes are both perplexing and hotly contested. Scholars have long pointed to a failure to adopt printing, and thus to achieve wider literacy.<sup>13</sup> However, Nelly Hanna's article indicates the weaknesses inherent in this explanation, for she chronicles the spread and intensification of Islamic literacy, despite the absence of printing. Similarly, Scott Levi's contribution illustrates successful military adaptation in Inner Asia, a theme already noted in other parts of the Islamic world. Már Jónsson, for his part, stresses that Spain, at the height of its power in the early seventeenth century, was surprisingly nervous about the potential internal and external consequences of expelling its Morisco minority.

The humiliation of Islam by the West was thus a feature of the period of 'modern globalization', and it led to the emergence of proponents of modernism and nationalism on radically secular lines.<sup>14</sup> Ben Hopkins's article shows how Western notions of international relations, enshrined in the 'Westphalian system', were embraced by both Shi'i Persia and Sunni Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. He further indicates that the rulers

11 Abdullah and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of religion, apostasy and Islam*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

12 Hodgson, *The venture of Islam, passim*.

13 Francis Robinson, 'Technology and religious change; Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1, 1993, pp. 229–51.

14 James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a world of nation-states*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Nazik Saba Yared, *Secularism and the Arab world, 1850–1939*, London: Saqi Books, 2002.

of both countries, while appropriating Western techniques of power such as surveying and cartography, sought to marginalize the political influence of the ulama.

However, the reduction of Islam to the status of a private faith did not go according to the secularist plan, for those who clung to the dream of an Islamic state and a new Caliphate retained more influence than has often been realized.<sup>15</sup> Even in the emotive case of slavery, a minority of Muslims doggedly clung to the licit nature of the institution in Islam.<sup>16</sup> As nationalism, liberalism and socialism have become increasingly discredited, the pendulum has swung back towards literalist and aggressive interpretations of Islam. In the words of the late Abul A'la Mawdudi, the chief South Asian 'fundamentalist' ideologue of recent times, 'Islam wants the whole earth.'<sup>17</sup>

Much remains to be done to probe the notion of 'Islamic history as global history', but, to return to Richard Eaton's statement cited at the beginning of this editorial, debates about origins and endings are probably the least fruitful avenue to explore. Globalization arguably goes back to the 'Big Bang', or at least to the emigration of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa, and can thus be seen as a constantly recurring historical theme, with the rise of Islam merely marking a new chapter in a long story. In terms of endings, historians attribute much importance to the European discovery of the New World in 1492, coinciding with the fall of Granada, the last outpost of the sophisticated Islamic civilization of al-Andalus. However, even if this fateful date marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of globalization, Islam has continued to impinge upon the ebb and flow of globalization to our own day.

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15 For one recent revisionist approach, see Amal N. Ghazal, 'Islam and Arabism in Zanzibar: the Omani elite, the Arab world and the making of an identity, 1880s–1930s', PhD thesis, University of Alberta, 2005.

16 William G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the abolition of slavery*, London: Hurst, 2006.

17 Peters, *Islam and colonialism*, pp. 130–33.