

**The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and
Politics in Early Islam**

Mahmoud M. Ayoub

Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2003. 179 pages.

A host of recent events – well known to all and not in need of rehearsal here – have had, among a variety of other consequences, the unexpected effect of

focusing the world's attention on the diversity of Muslims and the Islamic tradition. The constant talk of "Sunni triangles," "Shi'ite clerics," and "Wahhabi radicals," however, raises important questions about what precisely divides the Muslim community along these lines. For Ayoub, the roots of this sectarianism can be found, at least in part, in the crucial historical time period known as the Rashidite (or "Rightly Guided") caliphate. It is the "political and socio-religious crisis" (p. 4) of this era (stretching from the death of the Prophet until `Ali's assassination) and its implications for subsequent generations, that form the subject matter of this book.

Ayoub envisions his work as filling a void found in most general introductions to Islam, which for all their other merits, often fail to provide a clear account of this formative period of Islamic history. As for those who have ventured to write in the area, Ayoub considers the works of both Muslim and western scholars to be fraught with the political and theological biases of their authors. His desire to avoid this pitfall motivates him to adopt the novel approach of letting the "primary sources of Muslim thought and history" (p. 4) speak for themselves, a tack not unlike the one he uses in his important contribution to *tafsir* studies: *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*.

Using this methodology, Ayoub seeks to construct and present a balanced account of the major historical events of the Rashidite era in an effort to explore the interaction between considerations of religion and politics in early Islamic understandings of the nature of authority. His analysis of the various claims to the caliphate advanced by Abu Bakr, `Umar, `Uthman, and `Ali, as well as by less successful contenders, is aimed at supporting his central assertion that because "the Prophet died without leaving a clear political system" (p. 22), the Companions did not agree – indeed they vehemently disagreed – on answers to questions of political authority:

It must in fact be concluded that neither the companions of the Prophet nor their successors were able to arrive at a universally acceptable solution to the deep and persistent crisis of succession or caliphal appointment. (p. 147)

The uncertainty surrounding the nature of legitimate authority is a constant theme throughout Ayoub's narrative. Whereas Abu Bakr's argument for the Muhajirun's precedence over the Ansar is based on the former group's tribal proximity to the Prophet, it disregards the closer and more direct kinship of `Ali, the Prophet's cousin. An exchange quoted later (p. 23), however, reveals Abu Bakr's conduct to have been motivated by a fear of sedition, a desire for stability, order, and moral integrity that reasserted itself in his appointment of `Umar (p. 31). This episode clearly demonstrates the

complex interplay, highlighted by Ayoub, between political expediency and more strictly religious considerations. Similarly, Abu Bakr's egalitarian distribution of wealth (p. 28) and `Umar's principled refusal to designate his son as successor (pp. 87-88) are noticed by the reader to be in stark contrast with `Uthman's preferential treatment of his Umayyad kinsmen (p. 54), a development that Ayoub considers an example of the evolving emphasis on the "power, rather than the moral persuasion, of the caliph" (p. 54).

The lack of a definitive answer to questions of authority is perhaps sufficiently revealed simply in the range of procedures employed in choosing the caliph: competitive discussion and consultation among the elders of Madinah in the case of Abu Bakr, direct appointment in the case of `Umar, a six-man *shura* council that eventually chose `Uthman, the "election" of `Ali, as well as the latter's ensuing confrontation with Mu`awiyah, who saw himself as `Uthman's heir. The controversy surrounding political authority is portrayed as the most pressing question of the time, and is played out in history through the Muslim state's transformation from a theocracy during the Prophet's lifetime to a "tribal meritocracy, then into a cosmopolitan nomocratic kingship, and finally into many and often disparate modern nation states" (p. 30).

Ayoub's work is undoubtedly a thorough investigation into early Islamic history. In that, he fulfills his goal of contributing a "clear and somewhat comprehensive presentation of the formative period" (p. 4). Yet, at times, the reader feels as though he may have fallen short of another of his stated purposes: to produce an introductory work (p. 4). While his decision to offer various versions of the same event has significant scholarly value, it is perhaps overwhelming for the novice. To compound matters, a handful of passages seem to assume that the readers are already acquainted with the history to which they are supposedly being introduced. Consider, for example, the vague allusion to "the necklace incident" (p. 89) that, we are told, sparked `A'isha's animosity toward `Ali. Furthermore, Ayoub's methodological decision to present a wide array of primary sources occasionally creates tensions within his own narrative. While `Umar is praised as a far-sighted man (p. 41), he is (only three pages later) not astute enough to have "completely perceived the far-reaching religious, political, social, and economic consequences" of his selections for the *shura* council, supposedly "weight[ing] the outcome in favor of `Uthman" despite being personally inclined toward `Ali (p. 43-44). Finally, several noticeable typographical errors (e.g., spelling mistakes and errant diacritical marks) detract from the overall quality of the book.

Despite these objections, however, Ayoub's work remains an important contribution, not least for its ability to introduce English readers to classical sources of Islamic history in an accessible way. It portrays well the very real and human nature of the early Muslim community, the urgent political questions and crises facing this identifiably religious society, and how they were resolved. The need to examine these responses in light of today's realities can hardly be overstated.

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