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Firas Alkhateeb, *Lost Islamic History: Reclaiming Muslim Civilisation from the Past*, Hurst & Co., 2014, 256 pp., \$19.95 US (pbk), ISBN 978-1849043977.

Firas Alkhateeb's short narrative history of Islam begins with pre-Islamic Arabia and concludes with rival Muslim political orientations of the late twentieth century. The title hints at the author's purpose. In a world where Islamophobia grips the West and internecine conflict in the Muslim world dominates headlines, the "golden ages" and past achievements of Muslim civilization are unknown to the majority of non-Muslims, ignored by mainstream Western sources, and neglected by educators; in a word, Islamic history is "lost." Aimed at an English-reading audience, Alkhateeb's interest is not to apply new historiographical approaches or to integrate new information. Three-fourths of the text covers the period from pre-Islamic Arabia to 1500. The author emphasizes the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the age of the Rightly Guided caliphs, and the intellectual achievements of the ninth through the thirteenth centuries. Despite the scholarly and partisan shortcomings of this book, it can serve as a useful teaching tool for a non-Muslim audience.

*Lost Islamic History* employs the traditional Sunni and dynastic versions of early Islamic history with separate chapters on pre-Islamic Arabia, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the Rashidun or the Rightly Guided caliphs, and the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Between the foundational and modern periods in Islamic history comes the era of political decentralization from the tenth to sixteenth centuries. According to Alkhateeb, "The Shi'a, European Crusaders, and Mongol hordes combined to reign terror upon the Islamic heartland, leading some to believe in the 1200s that the end of time was near, not because of the triumph of Islam, but because of its destruction" (89). This reader was alarmed by the association of the Shi'a with such outsiders as the Crusaders and the Mongols and the implication that the Shi'a were (are?) not part of the Muslim world. A more balanced treatment of this period would have pointed to internecine battles between Seljuk princes during the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries and other internal conflicts that weakened Muslim communities in the face of external threats. This period of turbulence comes to an end with a "rebirth"—to use Alkhateeb's terms—of Muslim politics in the sixteenth century. Interspersed between this political narrative are surveys of the intellectual "golden age" of the ninth through thirteenth centuries and Islam beyond its Middle Eastern and North African core in Andalusia, West Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and China.

Alkhateeb is refreshingly transparent about his ultimate orientation in composing this book. The book opens with the first lines of the Qur'an and a prophetic *hadith* exhorting the pursuit of knowledge. Alkhateeb's presentation of Muslim accounts of Abraham and Isma'il

(4), Muhammad's first revelations (10), his persecution at the hands of the Quraysh (16), and the night journey to Jerusalem (26) begin with the phrases: "Islamic tradition holds..."; "According to Islamic tradition..."; or "According to Islamic belief...". The line between documented historical events and the beliefs and traditions of Muslims is blurred. For the positivist historian such a version of history appears, at least in part, biased and predicated on beliefs rather than verifiable evidence. The positivist outlook, however, has taken a beating on several fronts over the last half-century or so. Marshall Hodgson in the *Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (1974) chastised his Orientalist colleagues for feigning objectivity when, in fact, their "scholarly pre-commitments"—primarily the overvaluation of European civilization—skewed their understanding of world and Islamic history.<sup>1</sup> Hodgson's work as a historian of Islam—including coining the term "Islamicate"—left an impact on scholars of Islam though his anti-positivist methodology has not been heeded. I think it is fair to say that most textbook versions of Islamic history used in American universities still aspire to some empirically based and ostensibly objective version of history. For example, materialist interpretations of the rise of Islam, which focus on technological innovation, trade, and the resultant social discord, dominate textbook explanations of the emergence of Islam. No attention is given to Muslim religious explanations.

In the case of the undergraduate American classroom, is the non-Muslim, non-religious interpretation of Islamic history the most beneficial for the non-Muslim student, especially in an age where Islamophobia colors much of what they see and hear outside of the classroom? Is there not a case to be made for exposing non-Muslim students to what Muslims believe rather than (or in addition to) the findings of experts in numismatics, papyrology, and all manner of quantitative analysis buttressed by (often) unacknowledged theories of socio-economic and cultural change most of which, in turn, are grounded in the social and religious-cum-ideological backgrounds of the scholars themselves?

I do not pretend that these are easy questions to answer. It may be peculiar to the field of History rather than to those of Philosophy or Religious Studies. When I was trained as a historian during the 1980s, there was no pretense among my mentors to be training us to teach about Islam. At the time, I am not sure I even understood the difference between Islam and the history of Muslims. The few professors I had who were Muslim were either non-observant or hid their beliefs in observance of the modern Western scholarly ideal of impartiality and neutrality when it came to belief. Argumentation and the clash of conclusions were celebrated—as long one's position was grounded in this-worldly logic and evidence.

When it came to teaching, however, I realized that my non-Muslim students were interested in (and deserved) more than an outsider's bird's-eye view of the history of such a rich and widespread religious tradition. They needed some "conscience" in addition to "history" to make the study of Muslims and their heritage meaningful. I still use conventional textbooks in my survey courses; I was after all, trained this way. But I have found some useful supplements. For the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims I have assigned *Teaching about Islam & Muslims in the Public School Classroom* published by the Council on Islamic Education.<sup>2</sup> It is from a decidedly orthodox Sunni perspective but the question and answer format is accessible and introduces students to such key principles as: the

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Munir A. Shaikh, *Teaching about Islam & Muslims in the Public School Classroom*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Fountain Valley, CA: Council on Islamic Education, 1995).

meaning of prophesy in Islam; the nature of the sacred scriptures including the *Subuf* (scrolls of Abraham), *Tawrah* (Torah of Moses), *Zubur* (Psalms of David), *Injil* (Gospels of Jesus) and, of course, the Qur'an (revealed to Muhammad); and the meaning and significance of the Day of Judgment and the afterlife for Muslims. My students generally find these topics more compelling than, say, the disappearance of the wheel and the development of the North Arabian camel saddle as an explanation for the rise of Islam.

Tamim Ansary, author of *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes*, explicitly positions his history in opposition to the narrative in which Western democratic capitalism is assumed to be the endpoint of history.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, many if not most Muslims worldwide see the trajectory of history in very different ways. For one, the *hijra* and the creation of the Muslim *umma* is year zero rather than the birth of classical Greek civilization.<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of recent history, there is little for Muslims to feel triumphant about. Ansary concludes, "As heirs to Muslim tradition, we would be forced to look for the meaning of history in defeat instead of triumph. We would feel conflicted between two impulses: changing our notion of 'civilized' to align with the flow of history or fighting the flow of history to realign it with our notion of 'civilized.'"<sup>5</sup>

Alkhateeb's *Lost Islamic History* is a new addition to the genre of histories of Islam for non-Muslim readers by Muslim writers who are unapologetic about their Muslim pre-commitments. Such books are well suited to teaching about Islam in the age of Islamophobia.

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<sup>3</sup> Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), xix.

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, Ansary's is the only textbook version of Islamic history in which "AH" and "CE" dates are used for every chapter heading.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

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