Lanzillo on Robinson, 'The Muslim World in Modern South Asia: Power, Authority, Knowledge'

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Reviewed by Amanda Lanzillo (Princeton University) Published on H-Empire (April, 2021) Commissioned by Gemma Masson (University of Birmingham)


The Muslim World in Modern South Asia: Power, Authority, and Knowledge, by Francis Robinson, draws together a decade’s worth of the author’s articles, lectures, and reviews. The book covers temporally and geographically broad trends within Muslim responses to the rise of European colonial power and Western capitalist influence, particularly but not only within South Asia. Despite this breadth, it clearly and convincingly articulates several themes and arguments that have been central to Robinson’s position as one of the most influential historians of Muslim communities in colonial India. He emphasizes throughout that in response to their political marginalization after the rise of Western political and economic power, Muslim intellectuals and scholars promoted personal religious responsibility and activist piety among South Asian Muslim communities. Likewise, many of the essays center shifting sites of Muslim authority and their relationships with the emerging technologies and knowledge networks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As suggested by the title—and its emphasis on the “Muslim world,” rather than “Islam”—this volume is focused on the political, social, and intellectual histories of Muslims. Like Robinson’s work more broadly, the essays foreground Muslim responses to European political domination. In particular, they are concerned with what Robinson terms the “swift and often brutal” rise of “Western power in Muslim lands,” as well as reform movements that sought to enable Muslims to respond to the challenges of colonial and postcolonial modernity (p. 24). They are especially attentive to how European empires undermined or reshaped the social, institutional, and economic structures upon which earlier generations of Muslim scholars had relied. Robinson’s focus moves between institutions of Islamic education, Muslim engagement with emerging nationalisms and nation-states, and Muslim self-representation in literary, political, and intellectual projects. But throughout, he asks how Muslims sought to sustain, reshape, and reassert their religious practices, identities, and forms of social authority in the wake of European colonial dominance of the political realm.

While portions of the book are focused on Muslim responses to Western imperialism and colonial politics in South Asia, Robinson’s work is also geographically expansive, and he proposes several transregional transformations that extend far beyond the Indian subcontinent. Chapters including “The Islamic World in the Age of Western Domination,” “Education in the Muslim World,” and “Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam” will be edifying for scholars of Muslim communities in South Asia who hope to understand regional changes in global or transregional perspective. Indeed, one of the
strengths of the book is that Robinson places South Asian intellectual and political movements in conversation with their counterparts in West Asia, North Africa, and other regions. Several of the chapters adopt a comparative mode, and Robinson lays out how Muslim reformist understandings of education and piety developed and circulated based in part on Muslims’ positionalities within colonial societies and relationships with postcolonial states.

At the same time, Robinson is attentive to historical connections between Muslim communities in different regions and highlights a range of pre- and postcolonial forms of transregional interaction. For instance, in the book’s second chapter, “Global History from an Islamic Angle,” he analyzes how new forms of transregional connectedness “came to mingle with and overlay” earlier affinities and networks (p. 66). In this essay, Robinson highlights not only the mobilities and connections between Sufis and members of the ‘ulama, but also shared practices that Muslims used to interpret their lives and geographies, ranging from storytelling and astrology to the production and consumption of goods like coffee. In doing so, he positions the rise of nineteenth- and twentieth-century transregional movements for “re-Islamisation” through personal responsibility for pious action and behavior within broader histories of connection and exchange (pp. 67-80). Many of these movements took on local hues, and Robinson notes that in countries including Turkey and Indonesia they often focused on challenging the influence of members of elite Muslim groups who adopted “Western political, economic, and cultural” models (pp. 77-78) In building these transregional arguments, Robinson draws on secondary literature far beyond the field of South Asian history. He places his own scholarship into conversation with work on topics ranging from the ‘ulama of Abbasid Baghdad to contemporary political and religious movements in Southeast Asia.

While Robinson emphasizes global historical trends—including shifts toward this-worldly piety centering the individual practice and responsibility of Muslims—he also highlights processes and social contexts that were specific to South Asia. For instance, chapter 10, “The Memory of Power, Muslim ‘Political Importance’ and the Muslim League,” turns to South Asian Muslim efforts to secure separate electorates and community representatives in early twentieth-century government service. Robinson argues that the desire for separate electorates was articulated through a language of “political importance,” as Muslims—particularly those descended from the Mughal service gentry—memorialized and sought to reclaim a perceived lost political power and influence (pp. 280-287). Here, Robinson positions South Asian Muslims’ assertions of “aristocratic values” in the context of Muslim negotiations with British power brokers in India (p. 288). Robinson thus highlights not only evolving Muslim responses to forms of rupture and political marginalization under European authority, but also shifting European understandings of Muslim pasts and social positionalities in South Asia.

The collection includes twenty-two distinct articles, lectures, and reviews. All except one have been previously published, but their compilation in this volume serves a number of important roles. First, the volume draws together several strands and topics that loom large in Robinson’s scholarship. It enables readers to build connections between Robinson’s work on the role of the ‘ulama in the transmission of Islamic knowledge, shifts in the forms and sites of Islamic education, and the relationships between Muslims and states, both colonial and postcolonial. Robinson’s topics range from Iranian influence among precolonial and colonial-era Indian Muslims to citizenship in globalized postcolonial societies, and from reviews of translated poetry collections to those on both Indian and Middle Eastern political and cultural histories. Nonetheless, the book feels cohesive, with Robinson
reinterpreting key themes and arguments in the differing contexts of the many chapters.

Second, the volume makes accessible some of Robinson’s less well-known or widely circulated scholarly contributions. Deserving particular mention is the only essay that has not been previously published, chapter 4, titled “On How since 1800 Islamic Societies Have Been Built from Below.” In this essay, originally delivered as a lecture at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 2016, Robinson analyzes Muslim responses to what he terms the “assault on the infrastructure of an Islamic society” as the result of post-1800 European political domination (p. 132). He delves more deeply into some of the language that features throughout other essays, particularly the work of the ‘ulama to rebuild Muslim societies “from below” through the foundation of new madrassas and organizations that reached out Muslim popular society. He notes in his introduction to the volume that the lecture was critiqued by scholars who objected to his argument that “faith from below” was a driving factor in the rebuilding of Muslim societies in the wake of European imperialism (p. 9). But he argues convincingly that although external funding informed localized articulations of Islamic revival, a central trend in “fashioning” of Islamic societies has been the efforts of individual Muslims to develop activist selves rooted in their own practices of their faith (pp. 140-150).

Finally, the collection includes not only Robinson’s own research contributions but also his reviews of other scholars’ work. In one notable instance, it also features a funeral oration for Ralph Russell, a doyen of Urdu-language and literature in twentieth-century Britain. This emotionally laden contribution is the first of several in the collection to emphasize Robinson’s reading of other scholars, and particularly his appreciation of translators who have made the experiences of Indian Muslims accessible to wider audiences beyond the subcontinent. When read alongside the articles in the collection, Robinson’s reviews and eulogy also allow us to place the author within his own scholarly and historiographical milieu. He recognizes this role of the collection in his introduction, where he notably highlights the work of his many former students, emphasizing their influence on his own career and research. In the reviews, we also gain insight into his engagement with other scholars of Islam and Muslims in modern South and West Asia and are treated to his readings of new translations of well-known texts, like the Baburnama, as well as Persian and Hindavi poetry. Many of these reviews were written for the Times Literary Supplement and are short and accessible, providing a taste of how Robinson reads not only historical scholarship but also poetry and literary tales.

Although all of these reviews, and the funeral oration, date from no earlier in 2008, they suggest how significantly scholarship on Islam and South Asian history in the UK and North America has shifted over the course of Robinson’s career, in part due to his influence. He notes, for instance, that as a postgraduate researcher in the late 1960s, he was “actively discouraged” from studying Urdu, a result of an “imperial” perspective within British scholarship on Indian history that marginalized archives and forms of knowledge outside of English (p. 322). Throughout his career, Robinson has sought to explain “how Indian Muslims saw their world being transformed” and how they sought to respond and rebuild in the face of this transformation (p. 324). Robinson’s own work, and that of his many students, reflects a momentous—if sometimes still incomplete—shift toward studies of what Robinson terms the “sensibilities,” experiences, and world views of South Asian Muslims (p. 14).

Perhaps reflecting the changes in the study of Islam and Muslim communities in South Asia wrought by Robinson’s scholarship, I first encountered his work as an undergraduate studying Urdu in Lucknow. I walked into the now lamentably closed bookshop of the late Ram Advani—to whom

Robinson dedicated this volume—looking for texts that would help me to understand the city’s history. I walked out with a copy of Robinson’s *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia*, first published in 2001. For a student relatively new to these topics, Robinson’s ability to connect localized archives and family histories to a wide-reaching Muslim intellectual tradition provided an important lesson in the circulation and adaptation of knowledge and education within Muslim communities. In a similar fashion, this latest collection of his work will be useful for scholars who hope to understand how Muslims have rebuilt and reimagined their societies in the wake of colonialism and “Western” economic and political dominance.


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