

Title—Islam and Muslim History in South Asia
Author—Francis Robinson
Year—2001

Categories: Colonialism, Islam, India, British Empire

Place: South Asia

Time: 1800-1990

Argument Synopsis:

Robinson's *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* is a collection of articles, papers, and reviews centered around the subject of Muslim history in South Asia. Many of the works are written by Robinson, but not entirely. Prominent theme throughout his collection include the importance of the interaction between European and Muslim societies, and the ways they have shaped each other throughout history; the impact of British rule on Muslims and Islamic knowledge in South Asia. He begins the collection by noting how the academic value seen in studying religious ideas is a relatively recent change, spurred by the end of cold war reconfiguring world politics along civilizational lines as opposed to ideological. He claims that this new civilizational paradigm threatened to establish a new orientalism. In his words: "different civilizations were being endowed with different 'essences' and of these Muslim civilizations was given the role with which it had been endowed for too much of Western history—of being the hostile 'other' and the mirror in which the West perceived its unique world destiny."⁽³⁾ Robinson is concerned with the Western perception of Muslims in South Asia, as well as the study of religious ideas in South Asian Islam. Robinson tends to privilege elite narratives, focusing on the role of religious scholars and reformers.

The first essay attempts to demonstrate the long history of influence and interdependence between the Muslim and Christian worlds, which has been concealed and overlooked for years. This relationship is a key theme within Robinson's collection. The second essay in the collection involves the interaction of ideas and piety on one hand and power and material life on the other in fashioning a world civilization. In this essay, he argues that there was a dynamic relationship between Islamic knowledge and society throughout history. Another essay is focused on the impact of print technology on Islam. He reveals how in the Christian world the impact of this technology was a massive attack on religious authority and shaped new religious understandings (ex: Martin Luther). Robinson posits that there was a similar impact from print technology on Islam, with mass reform movements emerging steadily in the past two centuries. Print brought about the understanding that it was individual Muslims who brought about the existence of Muslim society, and therefore emphasizing the importance of the individual. Published in 2000, Robinson makes the claim that the impact of the Mutiny of 1857 and the subsequent brutal British response in the minds of North Indian Muslims has been underestimated in scholarship. Centrally, Robinson encourages scholars to consider the role of religious beliefs, ideas, and symbols in shaping contemporary Muslim identities in South Asia.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The Muslim world and Christian world have a long history of influence and interdependence that has long been overlooked
- South Asia has been one of the most fertile and powerful sites of Islamic revival and reform since the eighteenth century
- Mass reform movements in the past 200 years proves there is no equilibrium between high Islamic and custom-center traditions, with South Asia emerging as a leader in the Muslim world