

Title—Islam, South Asia, and the West
Author—Francis Robinson
Year—2007

Categories: Islam, Colonialism, Politics, Culture

Place: South Asia

Time: 1800-1920

Argument Synopsis:

This book is a collection of Robinson's essays which were published between 1994 and 2004. Robinson claims that the big themes of this decade within his essays focused on Islam in South Asia were Hindu revivalism, Muslim revivalism, and the impact of the West. He highlights how the rise in Hindu revivalism in South Asia, especially India, has caused the demonization of Muslims and other minority groups. The majority of the essays deal with the West's engagement, with a focus on Britain, with the Muslim and South Asian worlds. Robinson is focused on the time period from 1800 to 1920. He reflects on the influence of 'oriental' knowledge in the region, such as the British tendency to see India in terms of its religious communities and their belief in Muslim fanaticism. Robinson argues that Muslims, like their Hindu counterparts, have been engaged, in recent times, in renewing and rethinking the historical traditions of their faiths.

The first essay in the collection argues that the transmission of formal Islamic knowledge and spiritual knowledge and the making relevant of this knowledge to different societies in different places at different times played a central role in the making and remaking of Muslim societies. The second essay demonstrates the creativity of Muslims in South Asia. Robinson underscores how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the ulama, in the absence of effective Muslim political power, came to acquire a leading role in Muslim society as they had not before. In the later decades of British rule, the ulama were able to put pressure on the government; reflecting their growth in political power. The third essay is focused on how by 1920 the British came to rule over more than half of the Muslim people of the world and for much of the twentieth century were the greatest influence on the development of these Muslim people. Robinson argues that this provided the context in which many Muslims experienced the transition to modernity. The fourth essay demonstrates that British rule and religious and social change amongst South Asian Muslims interacted in producing various outcomes. Robinson identifies some of these outcomes as the adding of a pan-Islamic dimension to Muslim identity and the sharpening of the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim.

The final two essays are responses to the concern Westerners felt in the early twenty-first century about the Muslim revival in its political and terrorist dimensions. Robinson emphasizes how Muslims dominated the world system for over a millennium, until the past two hundred years where they have been subjects of first the European empires, and then American hegemony. The second part of the book contains reviews of important books on India and the Muslim world.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Rise of Hindu revivalism in South Asia has meant the demonization of Muslims and other minority groups
- The British tendency to see India in terms of its religious communities and their belief in Muslim 'fanaticism'
- In the last decades of British rule, the ulama were able to put pressure on the government, especially in the matter of Islamic law