

Book Review - The Venture of Islam

The *Venture of Islam*, by Marshall GS Hodgson (1922-1968), is a comprehensive study of Islam from its origins in pre-Mohammedan Arabia through the middle of the 20th century. Widely regarded as a tour de force, the series covers Mohammedanism from the Mahgreb through modern Bangladesh and even touches on Indonesia. Hodgson was more even handed than many scholars, although at times his prose slants towards the defense of the Faithful. Except for the briefest mention of the most important battles, he ignores the warfare of Islam; a huge omission given the history of Muslims.

Volume 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, explores Muslim history from the 16th to the 20th centuries; from the height of Ottoman power under Suleiman and a flowering of the Safavi and Timurid Empires to the end of the colonial era. This period is especially challenging for someone as sympathetic to Islam as Hodgson, because it was the era of the Western “transmutation”, when the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution allowed Europe to gain hegemony over the world.

Hodgson begins with the Shia triumph in the Safavi Empire (modern Iran), the contest with the Portuguese in Indian Ocean trade, and the internecine conflict with the Ottomans for supremacy in Islam. He continues by describing the relative harmony between Muslims and Hindus in Timurid India, and the advances of that civilization in art and literature. He concludes the first part of volume 3 describing the Ottoman Empire and their (usually successful) struggle against Christian Europe. While Hodgson’s writing on government, art and culture is well-informed, his comments on military history are less so. For example, contrary to the text, the 1683 siege of Vienna, was nowhere near as threatening as the 1529 version,¹ and his implication

¹ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 131.

that Slavic families freely volunteered their sons to become slave soldiers (Janissaries) is unconvincing.²

Hodgson's discussion of the 18th century, "Before the Deluge", portrays Islamic stagnation and decline in the face of Occidental ferment and advance. For example, he clarifies that "a decline in quality of crafts means that high quality crafts were less often made."³ His contrast between the Muslim-Hindu cooperation and the Muslim-Christian competition is telling. While Timurids fretted about whether Hinduism threatened Islam,⁴ the West gained commercial, cultural, and military power over their erstwhile near-conquerors.

The pivot point of the book is Hodgson's explanation of the Western transmutation, attributed to "multiple technical specialization."⁵ (H184)." Ending the Agrarian Age forever, the "transmutation" involved "mass production leading to mass consumption and mass literacy"⁶ Hodgson goes to lengths to defend Islam, stating that "Islam did not fall behind"⁷ and giving the Ottomans credit for military staying power which they did not possess. For example, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt was an unmitigated defeat for the Mameluks and the Ottomans. It was foiled only by Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile and a British army. The Ottoman's strength in the Crimean War was only because the British and French supported them against the Russians.

² Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 102.

³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

Had a united West invaded the Turkic realms as the Turks did the West, Constantinople, not Istanbul, would now sit on the Bosphorus.

The final part of the book describes the challenge of Modernity, faced not only by Islamic but by all other “developing” nations. Hodgson writes that the wars of 1914 and 1939 revealed the terrors of technicalism and cast doubt on the legacy of Europe in the 18th century. While some of the greatest Western achievements, and reasons for their hegemony, have been in the natural sciences, Hodgson notes “natural science is useful, it may not be good, and it cannot be seen as valid and true.”⁸ In 1845 the Europeans would never have agreed, but by 1945 they were beginning to feel the same way. As a result of this shift in mindset, and due to the exhaustion suffered by colonial powers after two world wars, most colonies gained their independence.

The Venture of Islam is an excellent three volume overview of one of the most important religious and political movements in human history. Hodgson’s understanding of day to day life and the broad sweep of Islamic history is profound; only his grasp of military issues is lacking. Certainly these were all books worth reading.

⁸ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 196.