

## Book Review

**William Montgomery Watt (1996). *Islam: A Short History*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. 159 pages. [ISBN: 1-85168-205-8]**

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This book review provides a critical analysis of a work by the orientalist William Montgomery Watt (1909–2006), a Scottish Emeritus Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh (1964–1979). The book under review is entitled *Islam: A Short History*, published in 1996. The author offers his own critical interpretation on how to define and foster a positive understanding of Islam for both his Western readers and his Muslim colleagues. He also employs a Western intellectual outlook to challenge Muslim intellectuals, especially traditionalists (p. 133), regarding the founding principles of scientific discovery vis-à-vis Islamic belief, such as the contradiction between God’s statement on creation and scientific assertions on the evolution and existence of the Earth (p. 140).

The book has six chapters. The first two chapters discuss the historical settings of pre-Islamic Arabia and the political history of the Islamic world from the time of the Prophet, through the Islamic Caliphates, until the post-World War II era. Chapters three, four, and five delve into the core teachings of Islam by focusing on the teachings of the Qur’an, Islamic law, and Islamic theology. The final chapter discusses how Islam and the Muslim community deal with the challenges of the modern world, particularly the era of globalization.

Generally, the author attempts to convey the early history and some fundamental teachings of Islam to individuals with a deep interest in learning and studying the religion. Whether this book can be considered one of the reliable sources for understanding Islam is something that deserves thoughtful evaluation. Nevertheless, it is certainly enthralling to see how Islam has drawn the curiosity of non-Muslim scholars, specifically Western scholars, to explore its teachings and the Muslim community’s interactions with the modern, secular world.

In his analysis of Islam, Professor Watt begins Chapter One with the early life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him, p.b.u.h), the birth of Islam, and the response from the Meccan Quraysh. He continues in Chapter Two by elaborating on how the *Sahabah* (companions, r.a) and the successors of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) successfully founded Islamic empires and faced various challenges, both from within the Muslim community and from external forces. In Chapter Two, the author highlights at least two major issues: first, how the march of the Muslim army into Europe was stopped by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 A.D, and second, the glory of Muslim civilization during the Abbasid Caliphate, with a specific focus on the translation of Greek scholars’ writings into Arabic.

In Chapter Three, “The Teaching of the Qur’an,” Professor Watt concedes that the compilation of this Muslim holy book is in a better state of preservation compared to the Old Testament, which he believes was frequently edited and re-edited to suit changing conditions (p. 49). Nonetheless, Professor Watt makes a few critical comments on certain Quranic verses that are worthy of mention here. One of these is related to the crucifixion of Jesus, which is clearly stated in the Qur’an (Surah An-Nisa, verse 157) that the Prophet Isa (a.s) or Jesus was not crucified, but only made to resemble him in their eyes. This verse, however, is refuted by

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Professor Watt, who attempts to redefine its meaning by arguing that the primary purpose of the crucifixion disapproval is merely to deny a Jewish victory, while still maintaining that Jesus died on the cross (pp. 76–77). This argument by Professor Watt certainly contradicts the real meaning of this verse (as the verse is not part of the anthropomorphic verses that describe Allah/God with human attributes), for it clearly indicates that Jesus or the Prophet Isa (a.s) did not die but was instead ascended to heaven by Allah the Almighty.

Regarding Islamic law in Chapter Four, Professor Watt stresses his view that Islam pays more attention to orthopraxy (focusing not only on religious doctrine but including other aspects of life) than orthodoxy. This simply means that Islam, as he argues, subordinate's theological issues to be defined by law and jurisprudence. In fact, in Islam, both theology and jurisprudence are treated equally. While *ijtihad* (Muslim scholars' independent reasoning) is a significant element in Islamic jurisprudence, in the case of theology, Muslim leaders and scholars are more careful when dealing with sensitive issues to safeguard Muslim unity and brotherhood. In this chapter, the author also explains the well-known four different schools of Islamic jurisprudence: the Hanafite, Maliki, Shafiite, and Hanbalite schools. The major differences among these schools include the interpretation of sources of law (such as the Qur'an, *Hadith*, *Ijma'*, *Qiyas*, etc.) used before a fatwa (scholarly opinion) is issued

Furthermore, on Islamic theology, thoroughly discussed in Chapter Five, Professor Watt closely examines the emergence of early sects in Islam as a result of the assassination of the third Muslim pious Caliph, Saidina Uthman (r.a), an event which divided the Muslim community into three groups: the followers of Saidina Ali (r.a) (which later associated with the 'Syi'ah'), Saidina Muawiyah (r.a), and the Kharjites (Khawarij). Following this event, Muslims were dragged into a long political battle and civil war. This also led to the appearance of new theological issues, including the nature of the Qur'an—debating whether it is 'uncreated' or 'created' by the Mu'tazilites, views which are considered not in line with the true teachings of Islam. The rise of the Al-Asy'arites and Al-Maturidites is regarded as the defence of true Islamic theology, later known as 'the Sunnite' theology, which purified these theological debates and restored Muslim unity and solidarity.

Despite this, theological debates continued to challenge the unity of Islam as the Muslim community faced the wave of philosophical influence from Greek philosophers due to the translation of Greek writings into Arabic. The rise of Arab philosophers created new interpretations of Islamic theology which were found to be in contradiction with Islamic teachings. On this issue, the author notes the huge contribution of Imam Al-Ghazali, who refuted all those philosophical-theological teachings considered deviated from Islam.

Besides this, the author also mentioned the movement of the Kharjites, which later became associated with the emergence of the Wahhabism ideology that calls Muslims to return to the original teachings of Islam. Through the religio-political alliance between the Al-Sa'ud family and Syeikh Ibn Abdul Wahab (the founder of Wahhabism), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932.

For the last chapter (Chapter Six), Professor Watt makes a clear call for Westerners to acknowledge the role and contribution of the Islamic world to the development of Western nations, which had been in the Dark Ages previously. Nevertheless, as the Islamic world is now part of modern and global society, and Muslims have adopted technological advances and political systems from the West, Professor Watt also avows that in terms of accepting the Western intellectual aspects, Muslims—and especially Muslim traditionalists (without mentioning any particular Muslim scholars)—remain passive. Western intellectual philosophy is still considered an outside influence by Muslim traditionalists and not comparable with Islamic philosophy.

Another call by Professor Watt for Muslims to accept the truth of other religions, and not only Islam, to promote a multi-religious world, deserves to be firmly answered. This is because it is against the most fundamental purpose of Islam. Islam came to this world through the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) to invite all humankind to submit to the Almighty God, Allah, as stated in the Qur'an: "I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me" (Surah Ad-Dzariyat, verse 56), and Islam is the only religion accepted by Allah as mentioned in the Qur'an: "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" (Surah Ali-Imran, verse 19), and "And whoever seeks a way other than this way a submission (Islam), will find that it will not be accepted from him..." (Surah Ali-Imran, verse 85).

In summary, Professor Watt's book on Islam is a welcome contribution to how knowledge of Islam may evolve and be delivered, particularly to Western society. Nonetheless, there are a few shortcomings in this book. These include omitting some significant historical notes, such as the coming of the last Prophet as foretold by Bahira (Buhaira), a Christian monk who met the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) at the age of 12. More importantly, the author fails to notify specific references from any Muslim scholars' works, especially sources related to *Tafseer Al-Qur'an* (the exegeses of the Qur'an), which are vital for understanding the essence of Islamic teachings. In spite of these shortcomings, the book is still worthy enough to be read as a process of journey towards understanding Islam.

