

***L'Islam: Religione dell'Occidente***, by Massimo Campanini  
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(hb)

This is a concise but rich book, full of ideas and arguments, and it is based on the thesis, as its title suggests, that Islam is a Western religion. It is not clear to me what precisely that means for the author but I think it is supposed to mean that Islam is not to be viewed as an exotic Eastern religion alien to Western culture. There were after all many links with Europe even before the years of mass immigration and this is a book about sources, historical sources that link in particular Christianity and Islam, and their major actors, Jesus and Muḥammad. Campanini points out that Islam does not see itself as a new religion but indeed as the original monotheistic faith, yet he seems to me to be a bit too ready to accept this assertion. Just because that is a claim the religion makes we do not have to accept it, perhaps it is wrong. He is generally mild in his assessment of what religions say about their major biographical figures, so Jesus and Muḥammad are regarded as being described fairly realistically, but Moses by contrast is not. The critique of the historical Moses, developed in the past by Freud and today by Assmann, is taken to be plausible by Campanini, although he does not discuss how the suggestion of a lack of historicity in this figure would offend Islam, for whom of course Moses is a prophet.

This is a book on sources, we are told, but not in the sense of those like Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook, who are dubious about the account that Islam gives of itself. Campanini also discusses scholars such as Neuwirth, Sinai, Donner, and Luxenberg and contrasts them well with contemporary Muslim thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan who tend to be unscientific and apologetic in their approach to the origins of Islam. I was surprised that he does not discuss Neuwirth's thesis which accords with his that Islam is a European religion; they both see it as their role to challenge the image of Islam as an exotic and Eastern religion which is systematically different from anything familiar to non-Muslims. The lengthy comparison between Jesus and Muḥammad is part of this programme and it is a useful discussion, bringing out many relevant points of interest, so it is appropriately the longest chapter in the book. It is followed by chapters on theology

and history and in a mere 150 pages or so the author covers a lot of ground. Hegel on Jesus, Haykal on Muḥammad, Spinoza on monotheism, a wide variety of thinkers are brought into the discussion and accurately described.

On the other hand, it might be thought that this concentration on sources is a bit overdone. After all, the religion as it is at any particular time takes a certain form which is not that significantly linked with its origins, it often seems. There is certainly a story about origins which is very important to how the religion sees itself, and also how others see it, but does the historical accuracy of the story really make much difference? Similarly, when we compare religions the fact that they often seem rather alike does not necessarily mean that they really are. We love to try to encapsulate religions in a relatively concise and definitive phrase, but how useful this is remains to be seen. When we look at the variety of forms of belief and practice, and how they compare across the monotheistic religions, perhaps we should despair of ever achieving such a resolution. A tidy mind is offended by the messiness of living religions and yet the attempt to force them into a logical and historical straitjacket is not always a praiseworthy task.

One of the advantages of this book is the many voices that Campanini allows to express themselves in it, ranging from speculations about ancient Egyptian religion to modernist Muslim thinkers today. As one would expect, there is a strong representation of contemporary Italian thought on Islam, and clearly that has become a significant scholarly contribution to the study of Islam. This provocative book like many good books raises more questions than answers, and readers will find it a stimulating and rewarding examination of the topic.

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