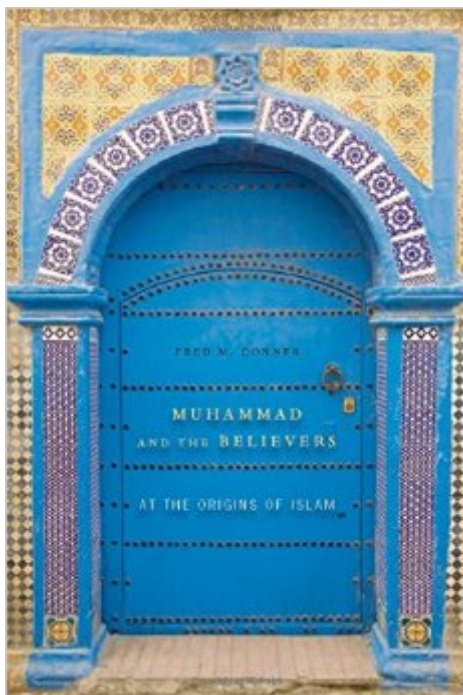


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Muhammad And The Believers: At The Origins Of Islam



Synopsis

The origins of Islam have been the subject of increasing controversy in recent years. The traditional view, which presents Islam as a self-consciously distinct religion tied to the life and revelations of the prophet Muhammad in western Arabia, has since the 1970s been challenged by historians engaged in critical study of the Muslim sources. In *Muhammad and the Believers*, the eminent historian Fred Donner offers a lucid and original vision of how Islam first evolved. He argues that the origins of Islam lie in what we may call the "Believers' movement" begun by the prophet Muhammad—a movement of religious reform emphasizing strict monotheism and righteous behavior in conformity with God's revealed law. The Believers' movement thus included righteous Christians and Jews in its early years, because like the Qur'anic Believers, Christians and Jews were monotheists and agreed to live righteously in obedience to their revealed law. The conviction that Muslims constituted a separate religious community, utterly distinct from Christians and Jews, emerged a century later, when the leaders of the Believers' movement decided that only those who saw the Qur'an as the final revelation of the One God and Muhammad as the final prophet, qualified as Believers. This separated them decisively from monotheists who adhered to the Gospels or Torah.

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Customer Reviews

Muhammad and the Believers is a history of Islamic Origins from what we could call a moderate revisionist perspective. Unlike Cook and Crone or Wansbrough, Donner accepts that the Islamic religious tradition began in 7th century Mecca and Medina under the leadership of a man named

Muhammad and that the Qur'an is a document produced by this movement in the same region and period. He argues, however, that the Islamic religious tradition did not begin as a distinct religion. Rather, he makes the case that Muhammad was the leader of an ecumenical "Believers Movement" that included Jews, (non-trinitarian) Christians, and new converts to monotheism. Some of his arguments for this position are: 1) That the Qur'an refers some 1000 times to "Believers" (sing. mu'min) but only 75 times to Muslims or Islam. 2) That the early successors to Muhammad were called not Caliphs, but Commanders of the Believers (amir al-mu'minin). 3) The fact that the "Umma Document" (usually referred to as the "Constitution of Medina") plainly includes non-Muslims in the umma and prefers the term "believer" to the term "Muslim" when referring to members of the community. 4) That there is ample evidence of ready cooperation on the part of the early "Muslim" conquerors and Christians and Jews. This movement was strictly pious and apocalyptic. The Believers Movement retained its ecumenical character throughout the early conquests and only became a distinct religion beginning with the Umayyad ruler `Abd al-Malik in the late 7th century. Among the innovations that marked this shift were: 1) Changes in coinage.

This is a lucid, well-written, and fascinating introduction to the rise of Islam. Donner, a leader in his field, has produced a work that both introduces readers to the basic conventional narrative of Islam's early phase while at the same time providing a very distinct interpretation based on cutting edge research. The entire work is highly instructive. That said, the paucity of direct contemporary evidence necessarily lends a somewhat speculative quality to the endeavor. To his credit, Donner is not nearly as dogmatic as some historians who basing their interpretations on early traditions, only written down long after the fact, feel justified in asserting that the rise of Islam can only be attributed to one particular factor. In the end, Donner stresses the importance of politics and religion as motives for expansion. He makes a key decision in taking the Koran as a comparatively authoritative source on the early history of Islam. The logic--mainly internal linguistic and literary clues--seems at least somewhat reasonable. That said, the book displays some inconsistency when it comes to looking past the earliest years of Islam to the expansion outside Arabia. Here, the earliest contemporary accounts do stress the role of warfare and conflict in spreading the realm under the control of the new faith, but Donner points to the absence of archeological evidence of war's destruction to at least minimize the logic inherent in the few somewhat contemporary accounts. If the earliest accounts would tend to be most accurate, why would that not be true for all of the key early phases of Islam?

Donner's new book is a good historical introduction to early Islam, but the reader must be warned that it is also a work that takes a position within a specific academic debate. Ostensibly this is a book for the general public. It is not footnoted, it is illustrated, and it is in most part narrative. Thus Donner usefully goes through the geo-political and ideological background to Islam's rise: the Roman-Persian wars, the Christological disputes. He provides Muhammad's traditional biography. Then he goes through the Muslim conquest, the two civil wars or fitna, and Abd al-Malik's initiatives to codify Islam more thoroughly, as evidenced by the issuance of the first epigraphic coins and the construction of the Dome of the Rock, with its injunctions against the trinity, in the 690s. In passing, he discusses source issues, in particular how historians may approach the Islamic historical tradition, which was passed on orally for decades before it was put in writing. But at the same time, Donner aims to convince the reader that Islam was at the beginning an ecumenical movement, that the community of the believers or umma initially included Christians and Jews. Donner thus positions himself between historians who have towed the line of the Islamic tradition and ultra-revisionists who deny everything, including that Mecca was Islam's original pilgrimage centre. He argues mainly from the Koran and from a document known as the Constitution of Medina. The problem is that the Koran contains many suras critical of Christianity and Judaism, and that Donner picks and chooses. And if one accepts the Meccan tradition (as he does and I think one must), then surely Islam cannot have been ecumenical, having its own special pilgrimage centre.

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