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# Henry Stubbe and the Beginnings of Islam: The Originall & Progress of Mahometanism

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## Henry Stubbe and the Beginnings of Islam: The Original & Progress of Mahometanism

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In the context of today's ever more strained and tense relationships between members of the three communities, this volume is most timely. The work reflects a lifetime of study, research and involvement with the "Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale." It should be required reading for everyone who not only seeks to further constructive peaceful relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but is also involved in *al-jihād al-akbar*, the spiritual battle against the principalities and powers of this world.

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**Henry Stubbe and the Beginnings of Islam: The Originall & Progress of Mahometanism**, edited and introduced by Nabil Matar, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, 288 pp., \$50.00/£34.50 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 231 15664-6

Nabil Matar's book is the most detailed analysis yet, and the first new edition since 1911, of Henry Stubbe's late-seventeenth-century (started about 1671) vindication of Islam. Stubbe's book is arguably one of the most significant and revolutionary texts written by a non-Muslim on Islam. Indeed, in introducing his new annotated version, Matar describes Stubbe's work in terms of a "Copernican Revolution." By turning away from the usual "Euro-Christian sources" on Islam, he says, to "Arabic histories and chronicles in Latin translation," Stubbe initiated "a sharp methodological and historiographical break with the past" (1). Although lacking Arabic, Stubbe consulted the best sources, in translation, available at the time. In dismissing as unfounded and biased much of what passed as factual about Muhammad and Islam, what Stubbe wrote represented an unprecedented vindication – a word that Stubbe himself used – of what most saw as a false, even satanic system. Remarkably, very few studies of this exceptional book exist; these are listed in the slender section on secondary sources (261–263) and only several of these focus exclusively on Stubbe. It is difficult to ascertain what impact it had closer to the time it was written. It did not exist in printed form until the 1911 edition. We know that manuscripts circulated, and can conjecture that it did have some impact, since new copies were made and even up-dated. Portions were published in 1693 and 1695, earlier included in letters sent to Stubbe's close friend, Thomas Hobbes and to the Earl of Rochester by the Deist, Charles Blount (d. 1693), so some content was perhaps more widely known although Blount did not include material from the Islamic section. Blount's father's account of his travels in the Levant, published in 1634, had challenged popular stereotypes about the barbarous Turk. Stubbe owned and consulted a copy. Stubbe's book appears to have had sufficient exposure to provoke what is almost certainly a rebuttal by his former Oxford classmate, Humphrey Prideaux, whose 1697 book *The True Nature of Imposture fully display'd in the Life of Mahomet* was a "vitriolic attack on the prophet" (28), although he did use Arabic sources. Actually an attack on Deism, which used Islam as a foil, this book missed the point that Stubbe was more inclined toward Arianism, not Deism.

Shairani used a 1705 manuscript (56) that re-ordered the chapters in his 1911 edition, *The Rise and Progress of Mahometanism*. After his biographical sketch of Stubbe (3–16) and his important analyses of Stubbe's sources (16–48), Matar chooses to use a manuscript found in the University of London's Senate House Library, MS 537, because, as probably the earliest version to survive, it

is also closest to the presumably lost original. In fact, “no two” manuscripts “are alike (62). Pages 49–69 describe and analyze the printed and manuscript sources. Matar then sets out to redact the original text, minus later interpolation (69–212). He calls this, *The Originall and Progress of Mahometanism*, thus rephrasing Shairani’s title. Stubbe thought that over time Christianity had become paganized (102), descending into “untruths” (9) such as Trinitarianism. We do know that Stubbe wanted to dispel ignorance.

Turning to Stubbe’s text, Matar describes it as the first to follow a chronological rather than a theologically informed scheme (31). In his sources, which included works by Christians living in Muslim majority space, Stubbe discovered that these Christians were not forcibly converted to Islam, and could live in peace and often prosperously among Muslims (24). In fact, these Christians “deeply respected” Muhammad. Thus, if they could, so might seventeenth-century Christians (32). This respect made Islam seem more palatable than it was popularly portrayed. *The Originall* has nine chapters (67, unnumbered in the text). The first four cover Christianity’s split into rival factions, and religion in Arabia up until Muhammad’s birth, which Stubbe dated to 580, while mentioning 570 as an alternative (121). Accurately dating Muhammad was rare at this time in European discourse. Chapter 6 systematically summarizes events for each year after the Hijra. Muhammad was 40 when his mission began, and preached for 13 years in Mecca before the ten years of Hijra (174). Unlike some contemporary writers who represented Muhammad as wealthy, Stubbe depicted his origin as poor but not base. Even when he did become better off, he remained an enemy to luxury (127). His alleged epileptic fits, which Christians describe as somehow fraudulently producing his divine messages, were probably rather “ecstasies” similar to those experienced by “the old prophets” and by “Paul” (127).

Muhammad’s words and acts all imprinted in people “the opinion that he was a prophet” (128). Stubbe said that Muhammad set out to revive “the religion of Ishmael” and declared that followers of Moses and Jesus might also be saved (130). Calumny after calumny is jettisoned, including the myth that Muhammad’s tomb is suspended by a magnet (174), the tale of the pigeon or bull that supposedly brought him revelatory messages (191–193), and the prediction that he would rise after three days (194), while a whole chapter (Chapter 7) dismisses as “vulgar” the opinion that Islam spread violently. Rather, Muslims “spread their empire, but not their religion, by force of arms” (179). This anticipated by several centuries such a work, often called innovative, as T. W. Arnold’s *The Preaching of Islam* (1896), which presents the same thesis. Christian calumny had transformed a wise legislator into the world’s vilest imposter (192). Stubbe endorsed Muhammad’s illiteracy, thus affirming that he did not compose the Qur’an himself (193–194). Islam’s acceptance of polygamy does not imply a concession to sensuality, which no “sentence in” the “whole religion” tends toward (203). Muhammad’s injunctions against usury and gambling were wise and just, helping to prevent economic exploitation (204–205), while that against alcohol prevents abuse and neglect of “duty to God” (205). The section extolling the Qur’an, describing its organization and poetic elegance, was probably unique in Christian literature when Stubbe wrote this (208–209). It must not be judged against any translation into prose! On miracles (some attributed to Muhammad are listed on pages 209–211), Stubbe refuted the accusation that these contradict the Qur’an’s saying that the Qur’an itself was the only miracle, since any that occurred were God’s work, not Muhammad’s. He also pointed out that Muslims are skeptical about the reliability of these accounts. Stubbe might not use the exact expression that God inspired Muhammad, but his comparison of Muhammad to former prophets makes it difficult to reach any other conclusion on what Stubbe believed.

There are inaccuracies in Stubbe’s text, such as having Muhammad’s father die *after* his birth (121) and identifying Abū Bakr as his uncle (122), but compared with contemporary and earlier

texts, error is conspicuous by its absence. More conventional Christians than Stubbe will have issues with aspects of his argument, too. However, they might profit from reflecting on why they usually insist on denying Muhammad's sincerity and God-inspired preaching, and on whether there are any mechanisms available to them that can affirm this, as Stubbe contemplated. One minor matter is that there is an error in chapter numbering in the main section, which skips from 1 to 3. In meticulously researching and footnoting this extraordinary late-seventeenth-century text, Matar and Columbia University Press have rendered *Islamic Studies*, and the study of early English texts, a service of inestimable value. Stubbe's pioneering revisionist thought deserves much more exposure. This erudite book will help to ensure that this happens.

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**Islam and Development: Exploring the Invisible Aid Economy**, edited by Matthew Clarke and David Tittensor, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, 224 pp., £55.56 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1409470809

There is no doubt that one of the greatest problems of our time is poverty. It is estimated that one-seventh of the world population lives below the poverty line, reckoned at \$1.25 per day. This is a precise indicator of how widespread inequality and poverty are. "Islam/Muslims and development" is, therefore, a significant theme not only because Muslims are becoming an increasing proportion of the earth's population as a whole but also because Muslims make up a significant part of the poor population. According to OECD statistics (2013), Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan, all Muslim-majority countries, were among the top 10 recipient countries of humanitarian aid in 2013. So, what does Islamic theology say about poverty and poverty alleviation? Can Islam provide a sustainable solution for development? Can Muslim and Christian aid organizations work together? And in general, how important is religion in understanding and alleviating poverty? *Islam and Development: Exploring the Invisible Aid Economy* is a timely and significant introductory volume that tries to address these and many other essential questions.

The editors, Matthew Clarke and David Tittensor, proceed from the view that perceptions of Islam, especially in the West, "constrain proper analysis and certainly entrench the invisibility of Muslim aid" (1). In the West, Islam has often been depicted as a violent religion that builds itself through creating an "us versus the rest" dichotomy, which eventually generates radicalized believers, extremist ideologies and terrorism. In line with this, as Clarke and Tittensor point out, "Islamic charities have been implicated as pivotal actors in this struggle through funding acts of terror" (1). However, this volume goes beyond this false narrative and provides reasonably well-discussed essays that focus on how Islamic aid has been increasingly becoming a main contributor in poverty alleviation. It also explores the tremendously significant role of religion in the perception and response to disasters and post-disaster development programmes. The book is divided into two parts: theoretical essays, and case-based essays.

There are five chapters in the first part of the book, and each deals with the relationship between Islam and development from theological and theoretical angles. In Chapter 1, Jan