
By S. Sayyid, University of Leeds

For almost half a century, academics, journalists, and think-tank intellectuals have all contributed to an extensive commentary on “Islam” and the “West”. What makes Peter Oborne’s *The Fate of Abraham* different and unexpected is that it stands in opposition to much of this commentary. There are three aspects to the unexpected nature of this book.

First, and most obviously, it is unexpected because it rejects the conventional wisdom’s obsession with what went wrong with Islam. Secondly, the book is unexpected because it was written by a self-confessed British conservative and shows how far Conservatism has travelled from being the habit of mind and belief in tried-and-tested to a creed dedicated to a permanent revolution. Thirdly, it is unexpected because it is a journalist writing against the grain of media institutionalisation of Islamophobia and Murdoch-isation of print and public service broadcasting.

The book is divided into five parts, but conceptually it is organised into two broad sections, historical and journalistic, which combine to show “why the West is wrong about Islam”. The first section of the book maps out the relationship between Islam and one of the three major powers associated with the West (United States, Britain, and France). In each of these studies, Oborne does not begin in the seventh century but rather focuses on the occasions when “Islam” becomes prominent in political societies of the West. This includes, for example, the introduction of coffee to seventeenth-century London; Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century; the battles that the early American Republic fought against the Barbary Pirates in the nineteenth century.

By framing the interactions between Muslimistan and Christendom through the lenses of these three different political societies and their histories, Oborne is able to reject the notion of an essential conflict between the “West” and “Islam”. He does not succumb to rosy, romantic liberalism in which there are no differences or antagonisms. Instead, what we see is a complex series of adjustments, disputes, and compromises reflecting the political theological challenge of Islam for Christianity. As Oborne puts it, Islam is both an existential threat to Christianity and an affirmation of Christian biblical prophecy (p. 46). There is no continuous chain of enmity or amity between Islam and the West.

The second section of the book comes in two parts (“The Enemy Within” and “the Fate of Abraham”). This section can be read as a connected history of the war
Oborne recognizes the assemblage that enabled the Cold War to be fought both as a kinetic and ideological struggle. He challenges Fukuyama’s interpretation of the Soviet regime and its ideology as ending in triumph of Western modernity, making the decolonial observation that: “Colonialism and empire had been at the heart of that modernity” (p. 53). When conservative journalists accept that colonialism and modernity are two sides of the same coin, it shows that common sense has shifted, and the Eurocentric jig is up.

Oborne makes the familiar claim that the “war on terror” has replaced the Cold War. However, he gives it unfamiliar depth by showing in meticulous detail how think tanks (e.g., RAND) associated with the Cold War begin to advocate using the same strategies to fight the Islamist threat (pp. 254–5). The use of propaganda organisations was not just the monopoly of the Soviet Union. Established liberal democracies, too, understood that soft power was necessary for victory in the Cold War. The Atlee Labour government that built the welfare state also set up the Information Research Department (IRD) to run propaganda against the threat of communist expansion. This department fed journalists stories, infiltrated trade unions, organised fake media agencies in the Third World, aided the publication of anti-communist magazines, and (as Oborne points out) contributed to the massacre of a million Indonesian suspected communists (p. 258). Predictably, one of the policy areas in which Blair imitated Atlee, was to establish an alternative version of IRD. This was the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) dedicated to carrying out the ideological struggle against the internal enemy: Muslims in Britain (p. 259).

Why would this book be of interest to readers who have a commitment to contributing to the collective endeavour of Critical Muslim Studies? While it is not an academic treatise (though it has a richer bibliography and more rigorous argumentation than many academic books) there are four reasons why The Fate of Abraham is Critical Muslim Studies compliant.

First, The Fate of Abraham maps out Muslimness as a proper historical object of study: it does not, for the most part, feel the Orientalist urge (which is still dominant in journalistic and, to be fair, most academic writing) to begin with the foundation of Islam and establish a linear-causal narrative from there to the present day. Muslimness appears as part of the early modern formation of colonial-racial political orders, rather than as the eternal Other. Oborne’s account of Muslimness is diachronic: by showing shifting geopolitical balances in relations between the Islamicate societies and what becomes the West, it does not fall into the trap of treating Muslimness as merely abject from the fall of Granada to Guantanamo.

Secondly, the book is notentranced by the allure of SAMENA. One of the key moves in Critical Muslim Studies is to broaden the understanding of Muslimness
beyond this traditional focus on regions from SAMENA (South Asia, Middle East, and North Africa). Oborne does not confine his research to what is very problematically assumed to be the almost exclusive province of Muslimness: “Middle East”, North Africa, and South Asia.

Thirdly, the book can be read relationally rather than as a compendium of comparative studies. Peter Oborne reports from Huntington’s bloody borders (Darfur, Mindanao, Nigeria, Myanmar, Srebrenica) to show how Islamophobia is mobile and demonstrate that the problematisation of Muslimness is not specific to one locale or regulated from one centre but is rather a product of an ensemble of vocabularies, policies, and protocols. These circulate and connect across continents and climes, and scale from the local to the global. Rather than comparing one nation-state to another, we are offered a varied pattern showing similarities and dissimilarities that question the convection that social phenomena simply map on to existing political geographies. *The Fate of Abraham* seems to understand that Muslimness cannot be easily contained in nation-states.

Fourthly, *The Fate of Abraham* tries to avoid the reduction of journalism to methodological individualism, as in the tendency of journalists to explain social and political outcomes by reference to key individuals making decisions motivated by ignoble calculations and base passions. The difficulty with such a methodology is that it is unable to account for major social transformations because it cannot understand the interplay between structure and agency. There is no doubt that petty rivalries and motivations can play a role in explaining social action. But as Oborne shows, different governments with different personnel do not automatically follow different policies in relation to the “war on terror”. Social Democrats, Republicans, Liberals, Tyrants, Communists, Ultra-Nationalists, and Conservatives have all been part of governments, think tanks, and newspapers who have been consistent in their policies towards Muslimness. The war on terror, its conception, and its conduct are not the product of individual intelligence. Critical Muslim Studies rejects methodological individualism so that it can study Muslimness as global grammar rather than as singular utterances.

Critics will no doubt complain about how the book focuses on conflict and does not mention all the good things the West has done for Muslims. Such criticism is par for the course and depends on the belief that the West is fundamentally a force for good. This view does not seem that different to one Oborne once held, as he makes clear (pp. 1–2). What the book documents, however, is that no political society or culture is hardwired for goodness. The shortest path to doing evil is believing one’s “side” is constitutionally incapable of cruelty.

This book makes for an uncomfortable reading for sections of the Western establishment, especially journalists. Oborne dents their conceit, stating that “we British journalists weren’t publishing heretical or difficult material. Our stories
fitted an approved official narrative” (p. 349). *The Fate of Abraham* is an *aide mémoire* that reminds one of the chains of causation that get buried under the froth of soundbites and institutionalised amnesia and that combine to gaslight us. It is a good read, and a valuable resource for the connected history of why the West is wrong about Islam.