BOOK REVIEWS


By Matthew A. Sharp, University of Pennsylvania

The history of Muslims in Europe and the Americas has developed into a dynamic field of study. There is now an increased interest in the lives of converts to Islam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Central among these historical figures is William Henry Abdullah Quilliam (1856–1932), who established the Liverpool Muslim Institute (hereafter LMI; 1887–1908) and mosque. He was one of the earliest British promoters of Islam as well as an important Islamic institution-builder in England. In Victorian Muslim: Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West, editors Jamie Gilham and Ron Geaves—prominent scholars in Quilliam studies (Geaves 2010; Gilham 2014)—assembled experts to address topics related to Quilliam’s life, Islamic mission, and legacy. Although the table of contents provides no subdivisions, the eight chapters can be organized into three parts: two chapters on Quilliam’s life and thought; three chapters on Quilliam’s intellectual endeavors; and two chapters on his significance during his lifetime and his contemporary legacy within variant British Muslim communities. As the book’s title and the topics covered in these chapters indicate, this book is predominately concerned with Quilliam in his Victorian and Edwardian context. His fellow LMI members and contemporaries receive less attention, which is something I will discuss in my review.

In the first chapter, Mohammad Siddique Seddon explores the confluence of religious and political influences upon Quilliam’s thought and social activism. He addresses Quilliam’s early life as a Methodist and some of the political and social conditions in Liverpool society in order to explain what shaped Quilliam’s thinking and activism. Seddon argues that variant influences explain Quilliam’s socialist, possibly radical and revolutionary, convictions. Quilliam’s identity as a Muslim informed his anti-imperialist and pan-Islamic ideas along with his Turcophilia (14–18). However, beyond Seddon’s speculation about how Quilliam’s understanding of zakat (alms) connected with Quilliam’s social justice activism (21–2), the reader learns little about how Islamic theology and doctrine shaped Quilliam’s political convictions. Seddon asserts that because Quilliam worked with trade unions this somehow proves his socialist inclinations. However, as Yahya Birt
reminds us (Birt 2018), Seddon’s argument requires further scrutiny and historical contextualisation to understand what trade unionism meant in Liverpool and how the Quilliam family related to liberal and conservative political parties. There is no question that Quilliam—as a solicitor and a Muslim religious figure—cared for the less fortunate, the working class, and the marginalized in society, which often brought him in alliance with liberal and socialist political trends of his time. Whether that made Quilliam a revolutionary socialist is debatable.

Patrick D. Bowen contributes a fascinating study of Quilliam’s connection with Masonic and para-Masonic organizations. Bowen argues that Quilliam’s conversion to Islam was less radical than some might expect because the more fringe Masonic elements that Quilliam associated with were part of a “broader current of international esoteric Freemasonry that contributed to the growing Euro-American identification with Muslims in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (26). In Bowen’s chapter, he elucidates Quilliam’s relationship with international Muslim-Masonic networks, as evidenced by articles in the LMI’s weekly and monthly journals (The Crescent and The Islamic World). He provides insight into what role, if any, esoteric and masonic movements had on Quilliam and fellow LMI members.

In a chapter chronicling Quilliam’s literary output, Geaves goes beyond Quilliam’s journalistic endeavors by investigating his other numerous works. Geaves shows that Quilliam and his ideas were forerunners for today’s Western Muslim converts, making him “the quintessential convert to Islam engaged in a monumental effort to reposition Islam” (43). Above all, Geaves explains that through Quilliam’s literary output, he elevated Islam as a religion of reason and rationality (49–52). Furthermore, Quilliam defended Islam from falsehoods and misrepresentations (52–5). With that in mind, one wonders what Geaves means when he says that “Quilliam’s writings show that he was not an apologist for Islam” (44). From Quilliam’s journals to his longer literary publications, it is apparent that he was both an apologist and polemist for the cause of Islam.

Diane Robinson-Dunn’s chapter on Quilliam’s efforts to “Islamise” gender relationships in Victorian Britain is a needed contribution to scholarship in Quilliam studies. She articulates Quilliam’s position on polygyny and what he conceived as Muslim gender roles that he argued were universally applicable. Robinson-Dunn includes some evaluation of Quilliam’s own practice of polygyny. This chapter shows that Quilliam not only subverted Victorian British values, but he also presented a counter-narrative to Muslim reformers of his time (77). Robinson-Dunn left me with several questions about the women of the LMI: how did the LMI women respond to Quilliam’s teachings; what do LMI women’s lectures, poems and activities tell us about their reception of Quilliam’s version of Muslim gender roles; and what sources did Quilliam draw upon to explain his conviction that
Islamic gender values would rid Britain of its societal and marital ills? Some of the earliest and most active converts in the LMI were women, and their stories and perspectives are largely missing from current historiography. Robinson-Dunn’s chapter lays the foundation for future inquiry that goes beyond Quilliam, which will hopefully center on the lives, voices and thoughts of LMI women.

Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936) was a notable convert to Islam during Quilliam’s latter years. Geoffrey Nash shares his expertise on both men to investigate how they situated their discourse “with regard to Christendom, Islam and Ottoman Turkey’s positioning within the late Victorian and early twentieth-century world order” (79). Quilliam and Pickthall departed from each other on certain political matters. However, Nash demonstrates that on key topics they shared common positions, such as the need for the Ottoman Empire to lead the Islamic world as well as its role of countering European intrusions upon Muslim populations. Nash depicts both men as “international Muslims,” which is a theme that deserves more attention in future works (80). Readers interested in how converts such as Quilliam and Pickthall confronted or mirrored British imperial politics will find valuable insights in Nash’s chapter.

Quilliam claimed Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), the Ottoman sultan-caliph, bestowed upon him the title of “Sheikh-ul-Islam of the British Isles.” From this title he gained prestige and legitimisation in Liverpool and beyond as the leader of Muslims in Great Britain, and therefore the British Empire. Gilham examines what this title meant, how Quilliam used it for religious and political purposes, and then evaluates Quilliam’s effectiveness as the “first and last Sheikh-ul-Islam of the British Isles.” It is Quilliam’s effectiveness that Gilham finds challenging, “because the voices of contemporaneous converts and other Muslims, especially their objective responses to and opinions about Quilliam, are difficult to locate” (107). Gilham’s admission about such difficulties alerts us to a bigger issue. Beyond Quilliam’s insistence that Abdülhamid II gave him the title, we do not have any corroborating evidence that Abdülhamid II, other Ottomans, or Muslims in the Middle East full-heartedly recognised him as the Sheikh-ul-Islam of the British Isles. I am also uncertain what Gilham means when he says that “Quilliam was a very ‘part-time’, honorific Shaykh al-Islam” (112). If the title was honorific, how did the Ottomans and Abdülhamid II respond to Quilliam’s use of the title for his own political and religious endeavors, and what did it mean to be a “part-time” Shaykh al-Islam? Does this mean that Quilliam knew the title was only honorific, but he nevertheless chose to exploit it for his own purposes?

In Brent D. Singleton’s chapter, he presents the reader with evidence of Quilliam’s association with Muslims in America, West Africa and other parts of the British Empire. This chapter offers perspectives from each group (American Muslims and Muslims in the British Empire), demonstrating how they related to
Quilliam in ways that served their own agendas. For American converts, Quilliam was “a model, a mentor and a mediator” and for the West Africans, “Quilliam provided a morale boost, a legitimisation for holding on to their religion and culture in the face of colonialism as well as a supporter—materially, emotionally and spiritually” (113). More than any other chapter in this monograph, Singleton centers the voices and opinions of other Muslims to narrate Quilliam’s transatlantic and British imperial connections. Future research related to Quilliam would benefit from a similar approach. Even so, when Singleton discusses Quilliam’s relationship with Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali (1859–1927), he argues that the future pan-Islamist was politicised in Liverpool, resulting in a narrative in which Quilliam was the influencer and Barkatullah was the receiver and beneficiary (128–31). I cannot help but think that both men learned from each other, in a collaborative and reciprocal relationship. Barkatullah was far more learned in Islamic teaching than Quilliam, which should cause us to hesitate in exaggerating Quilliam’s influence.

Yahya Birt brings the past into the present in the book’s final chapter as he scrutinises Quilliam’s reputation among contemporary British Muslims. Birt brilliantly illustrates that Quilliam’s many afterlives have developed from variant interpretations and appropriations of Quilliam, all of which encompass “much of the variety to be found in British Islam in the early twenty-first century” (150). With Quilliam’s “rediscovery,” questions arise, such as: “To whom does Abdullah Quilliam belong today? Who may most authentically lay claim to his example and how best might his legacy be honoured today?” (142). From these questions, Birt tackles the prescient subjects of white privilege and the frequent fetishising of white converts to Islam. These are challenging topics as British Muslims wrestle with their past and how they understand their history and place in society which they use to inform their future. Birt concludes that current appropriations of Quilliam are part of “an invented tradition-in-the-making,” which is a proper description for the current fascination with Quilliam in the United Kingdom (150) and even in Turkey. For example, Quilliam appears as a character in a Turkish historical-drama television program called Payitaht: Abdülhamid (particularly in episode 49), but the program’s ideologically driven agenda taints possible historical value for its viewers.

The chapters in this monograph will serve readers interested in Quilliam and his fellow Muslim converts because they present contextualised studies by experts in their respective fields. This is not a work of hagiography or simple biography, although there are occasional lapses into what I believe are uncritical remarks about Quilliam and the extent of his influence. Victorian Muslim follows the trend of positioning Quilliam within his Victorian context and history, asking questions such as: how did Britons receive Quilliam, did Quilliam subvert or follow Victorian norms, and what effect did British imperialism have on his Islamic mission? These are engaging and fruitful questions that have produced excellent
works. This collection of essays is among the best. In the book’s Introduction, however, Gilham and Geaves address one of the reoccurring weaknesses in this approach in the study of Quilliam and his fellow LMI members. The editors state, “contemporaneous voices and sources, especially non-Western (Ottoman, African, Indian), need to be discovered, presented and interpreted” (6). The lack of alternative perspectives hinders our understanding of Quilliam and his colleagues and leaves scholarship constrained to English sources. In this regard, Victorian Muslim is no different. It is my hope that future studies that explore Quilliam, Pickthall and other converts will prioritise Ottoman, African and Indian voices. Non-Western sources would allow us to rethink and reinterpret such figures within broader, geographically and historically diverse contexts and would decenter the British and Western perspectives that currently dominates the historiography.

References

