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Illuminating Islam's Peaceful Origins

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GOD IN THE QUR'AN

By Jack Miles

241 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

MUHAMMAD

Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires

By Juan Cole

326 pp. Nation Books. \$28.

Is Allah, the God of Muslims, a different deity from the one worshiped by Jews and Christians? Is he even perhaps a strange “moon god,” a relic from Arab paganism, as some anti-Islamic polemicists have argued?

What about Allah's apostle, Muhammad? Was he a militant prophet who imposed his new religion by the sword, leaving a bellicose legacy that still drives today's Muslim terrorists?

Two new books may help answer such questions, and also give a deeper understanding of Islam's theology and history.

Jack Miles, a professor of religion at the University of California and the author of the Pulitzer-winning book “God: A Biography,” has written “God in the Qur'an.” It is a highly readable, unbiasedly comparative and elegantly insightful study of the Quran, in which he sets out to show that the three great monotheistic religions do indeed believe in the same deity — although they have “different emphases” when it comes to this God, which accounts for their divergent theologies.

To begin with, one should not doubt that Allah is Yahweh, the God of the Bible, because that is what he himself says. The Quran's “divine speaker,” Miles writes, “does identify himself as the God whom Jews and Christians worship and the author of their Scriptures.” That is also why Allah reiterates, often with much less detail, many of the same stories we read in the Bible about Yahweh and his interventions in human history. The little nuances between these stories, however, are distinctions with major implications.

Take, for example, the story of Abraham, which is so central to both the Bible and the Quran. Miles examines Abraham in both and highlights a key difference: In the Bible, Abraham is presented as the father of a great nation that will multiply and inherit a holy land. “To your descendants I give this country,” Yahweh vows, “from the River of Egypt to the Great River.” In the Quran, however, the stress is on Abraham as the great champion of monotheism against idolatry: His biggest mission is smashing the idols — a story foretold not in the Bible, but in an

ancient rabbinical exegesis of it, a midrash. “Yahweh is a fertility god,” Miles provocatively suggests, whereas “Allah is a theolatriy god” — theolatriy meaning the worshiping of God alone.

The story of Moses, again a crucial one in both the Bible and the Quran, comes with similar nuance. In the Bible, the great mission of Moses is to liberate his people, the children of Israel, from the yoke of the Pharaoh. In the Quran, too, Moses rises up against the Pharaoh, but his main problem is that the Pharaoh and his people worship false gods. Yahweh “wants to defeat Pharaoh,” Miles observes, for he has “no intention of ever becoming Egypt’s God.” In contrast, Allah wants to convert Pharaoh and to make all Egypt monotheist.

Through such scriptural comparisons, Miles gets to the core of the Abrahamic matrix: The monotheism that the Jewish people developed over the centuries was inherited by Islam and was turned into a global creed. All the national elements within Judaism, meanwhile, were then muted.

What about Christianity, the third, and the largest, piece of the matrix? It seems to be, just like Islam, a universalization of Judaic monotheism. But Christianity introduced a new theological element to the scene — a divine Christ and triune Godhead — which proved unacceptable to both Judaism and Islam. In the chapter comparing the Quran with the New Testament, Miles shows this by explaining how Islam rejects Christian theology, while showing great respect for Jesus Christ and Mary. He also sees “a brilliant symmetry” in how Islam combined Judaism’s criticism of Christian theology with Christianity’s criticism of Jewish particularism.

The book underlines other distinctions between Yahweh and Allah. The former comes across as more disputable and “less absolute and overwhelming.” Allah, on the other hand, appears as more “compassionate.” And while Allah offers both great promises and threats for the afterlife, Yahweh is focused on this world.

In observing such nuances, Miles, a Christian, is as objective, fair and gracious as one can get. In the beginning, he declares his own “suspension of disbelief,” which means letting go of his non-Muslimness and reading the Quran on its own terms. At the end, he turns back to his faith and reminds us: “The Bible is my Scripture, the Quran is theirs.” Yet by reading the latter with respect, he thinks non-Muslims can find it “a little easier to trust the Muslim next door, thinking of him as someone whose religion, after all, may not be so wildly unreasonable.”

Non-Muslims who take the time to read the Quran may end up feeling a bit baffled, though. For they will hear a lot about Abraham, Moses, Joseph or Jesus, but almost nothing about the person they may be expecting the most: Muhammad. For while the Quran often speaks *to* Muhammad, it almost never speaks *about* him.

That is why the Islamic tradition developed a post-Quranic literature on the life and times of Muhammad, recorded in the books of *sira*, or biography. And a cutting-edge version of *sira* comes from the pen of Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan and the author of the popular blog Informed Comment.

Cole’s book, “Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires,” is not just eruditely informative, but also ambitiously revisionist, with two unorthodox arguments he keenly advances throughout the book.

The first argument links the birth of Islam in early-seventh-century Arabia to the major geopolitical conflict of the time — the clash between the Christian Byzantine Empire based in Constantinople and the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire based in today's Iran. Cole's starting point is the Quranic *sura*, or chapter, titled "Romans." "The Byzantines have been defeated in a nearby land," it reports, but also heralds that their victory will come soon, adding that "on that day, the believers will rejoice." This famous passage has traditionally been taken as an indication of sympathy among early Muslims for Christians as fellow monotheists against pagan enemies. But Cole thinks there is much more to it, postulating an alliance with Rome in which Muslims became "members of the eastern Roman Commonwealth." It is an interesting theory to consider.

Cole's second argument is more important. Going against familiar if not frequent militant images of the Prophet Muhammad in the West, he portrays Islam's founder as a peacemaker who wanted only to preach his monotheism freely and who even tried to establish "multicultural" harmony.

The first years of Muhammad's mission, which he spent as the leader of an oppressed minority in Mecca, provides ample evidence to support this argument. The next decade in Medina, during which swords were unsheathed and battles were fought, complicates it. Cole solves the problem by advancing the explanation that modern Muslims typically offer: All these wars by the Prophet Muhammad were "defensive" in nature, fitting into a vision of "just war."

Cole goes as far as rejecting some of the violent episodes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad as later fictions by belligerent Muslim empires. These include the most disturbing incident of all, the massacre of the male members of a Jewish tribe in Medina for collaborating with the pagan besiegers — a story doubted also by a few Muslims, including myself. Cole may be the first, though, to doubt the Tabuk Expedition, a would-be battle between the armies of the Prophet Muhammad and the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius.

Some of Cole's well-intentioned hypotheses, clearly aimed at challenging Islamophobia, may never be proved. But he is demonstrably right in concluding that Islamic orthodoxy deviated from its foundations by "abrogating" the peaceful and tolerant verses of the Quran, by reserving salvation only to Muslims, or by adopting some cruel practices like stoning. Beneath this thick layer of what became Islamic tradition, there is a more uplifting image of the Prophet Muhammad, waiting to be discovered not just by non-Muslims, but also many Muslims themselves.

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