

events. As one might expect, the three volumes offer good biographies of Muslim figures from the Prophet Muḥammad (*saas*) to al-Ghazālī, Abu'l A'la Mawdudi and contemporary figures like Maryam Jameelah. There is also a very interesting entry on Literature. Young readers would be surprised to learn that not only is the best-selling poet in the US a Muslim mystic who died over 700 years ago, but this poet is also the very same Muslim who inspired the songs of "Madonna, Demi Moore and Martin Sheen". Of course, we are talking about Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī. As one would assume, Muslim influence upon the Western world was not simply restricted to poetry and literature but has extended to food, drink, clothing, language, architecture, science and law and so on as this book aptly informs the inquisitive reader.

In my mind, a sound compromise has been made between brevity and authoritativeness in this encyclopaedia. The only concern that I have is over its price. Prohibitively high at £200 (with the scholarly, four-volume *Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern World* (Oxford, 2001) also edited by John L. Esposito costing only £107.50), it almost guarantees that few individuals are likely to purchase this welcome and valuable source of information on the Muslim world.

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THE ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST: TRADITION AND CHANGE. By Charles Lindholm. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Pp. 324. ISBN 1405101466 (PB).

In this eloquent and clearly written book, the anthropologist Charles Lindholm attempts nothing less than explaining the history of the entire Muslim Middle East with one single principle. His argument is original, simple and, at the first glance, compelling. Based on the harsh conditions of living and the social structure of patrilineal kinship in a tribal society, the Middle East is characterised by the core value of competitive, individualistic egalitarianism that is paradigmatically exemplified in the free tribesman who accepts none as his superior and views personal virtue and mastery as the only distinguishing marks of a man. This egalitarian individualism, Lindholm argues, should not, however, be mistaken for a harmonious utopia. The idea of equality among free men implies a fluid society without strict hierarchies, but it also leads to a highly competitive and unstable social and political life exemplified by the reign of secular despots, whose rule is accepted by their subjects but lacks legitimacy and tends to be precarious in nature. In such a cultural world, religion is the main force that can limit the competitive nature of social relations, but millenarian expectations of a just and pious ruler who will reinstall God's law on earth, have always been disappointed by the realities

of secular politics. Civic virtues and institutions that have developed on the basis of the “deeply egalitarian” culture of the Middle East, have remained distinct from the state and have thus been unable to develop into stable, legitimate political institutions.

There certainly is something to this view. Clearly the concept of competitive individualism does make sense when we try to understand the struggles in tribal society and the fluctuating nature of social hierarchies in many Middle Eastern societies. And definitely the religion of Islam, with its emphasis upon equal ritual obligation and the moral responsibility of all believers, contains a strong potential of egalitarianism that can be and has been evoked by Muslims at different social and historical settings. If Lindholm would ask whether, under which conditions and to whom, the issue of equality has been important, his book might have been a major contribution to cultural history. Unfortunately, however, the potentially good points that should have been made in *The Islamic Middle East* are wasted by the author’s obsession to find competitive egalitarian individualism everywhere and in everything, to bend and push the manifold and complex transformations of mutually very different societies that share the religion of Islam under one, all-encompassing and all-explaining superior principle which is not subject to change or contestation.

This makes *The Islamic Middle East* a fundamentally flawed work, which is the most regrettable since Lindholm does have some strong points to offer. These points, however, are compromised by Lindholm’s tendency to sweeping generalisations, e.g. he liberally ascribes intentions and characteristic behaviour to “the merchant”, “the Bedouin” and “the orthodox ulema”, which leaves the reader wondering how the author knows what all these people thought, and how come they all seem to have thought in the same way. Even the framing of the book—the Islamic Middle East—is problematic. How can the product of the twentieth-century geopolitical imagination qualify as the framework for an historical analysis that extends from the Sumerians to the present?

The greatest flaw, however, is that Lindholm elevates what is indeed the individualistic and egalitarian self-esteem of the free cattle-owning tribesman—Berber, Bedouin, or Pushtun—as the archetypal culture of all the Middle East. What about, one might ask, the values and self-esteem of women, clients, slaves, city-dwellers and peasants? Especially as the latter appear in a curiously abbreviated fashion, as if the Middle East mainly consists of tribesmen, merchants, warriors, and rulers. In fact, much of the book is primarily concerned with political leaderships, among whom the elitist and competitive ethos of the free tribesmen probably did have major appeal. Yet as an image of the middle Eastern culture (if there is such a thing), this is a very strange image to anybody who has lived in the cities and peasant villages wherein complex hierarchies of land-ownership, kinship and clientelism, associated with a firm belief in authority, can make one’s mobility within society very limited. This is not to deny that an ethos of competitive

egalitarianism does not exist in the Middle East. It certainly does, but it is not the core value as Lindholm asserts. Taking the free tribesman as a civilisational archetype implies that his proud self-esteem based on freedom and equality would be a central feature of human nature and thus essentially in conflict with all kinds of ranks and hierarchies. But the free tribesman's equality and freedom is not a right, and nor is it a general truth about human nature; on the contrary it is a rank and a privilege that distinguishes the tribesman from clients, children, women, slaves, farmers and all the other people he considers his inferior. It could, of course, be translated into a general ethos of human equality—much in the way the elitist rule of free male city-dwellers of ancient Greece was translated into modern democracy. But that would be a point of view highlighting the contingency and complexity of history. Lindholm, however, has a different story to tell.

Middle Eastern history, in Lindholm's version, follows "inevitable" processes and "iron laws" (p. 180). Lindholm offers us a tragic history of the unavoidable that has no place for contingency, with the same core values always at work, and the same developments taking place over and over again. This essentialist view leads some serious pitfalls, the gravest of which is the chapter dealing with the decline of Sufism. Sufism as a mass religious movement, Lindholm argues, gained popularity as a solution to the feeling of social erosion and disenchantment among the Muslims (this, curiously, in a period in which Muslims constituted the most dynamic and progressive culture on the planet), but afterwards lost its centrality because of the exaggeration of saintly charisma that increasingly "disturbed the ordinary man, who was once both drawn to and repulsed by Sufi demands for deification of a leader and repudiation of agentic self; demands that contradicted the sober attitude of orthodox Islam and the dominant individualistic and egalitarian ethic of the culture that Sufism sought to transform through personal charisma" (p. 206). It is incomprehensible how Lindholm could conveniently occlude the fact that Sufism was the dominant form of Islamic piety for more than seven centuries between the twelfth and twentieth centuries. Reducing the long hegemony of Sufism to its end with the rise of Salafism in the twentieth century is absurd from an historical point of view.

Anachronism, Lucien Febvre once said, is the historian's gravest sin. In *The Islamic Middle East*, Lindholm commits this sin on a wide scale and without a sign of remorse. For the critical reader the book is still worth reading for the numerous good insights and observations it does contain. But as an explanation of the history and culture of the Middle East, it provides another proof that such a vast and complex cultural history cannot be explained by any one principle.

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