
The book offers its readers a short but geographically comprehensive overview over the subject. It is one of the book’s achievements that Clarence-Smith undertakes to cover the whole Islamic world and history and does not limit his scope tacitly to the Near and Middle East. Given the daunting dimensions of this task simplification—sometimes oversimplification—is certainly unavoidable. Therefore, naturally, in many cases the book can offer little more than a pointer to specialized studies which the author abundantly references. It offers an impressing list of secondary sources on more than forty pages, followed by a useful and usable index.

The title of the book seems to be somewhat misleading as the book is not dealing with the abolition of slavery in Islam only but consists of two parts, of which only the second is dealing with the roads to abolition while the first is discussing the history and the dimensions of the institution of slavery in the Islamic world.

On the conceptual level the book, at first glance, seems to employ a rather positivistic approach. On closer scrutiny, however, that approach seems to reveal some difficulties that I would argue form a case in point of the predicament of post-Orientalist scholarship. On the one hand the author strives to de-essentialize Islam by “the rejection of any single Islamic point of view, even in specific periods” (p. 19) and by pointing out that the foundations of slavery in the canonical Islamic texts were ambivalent and rather weak (pp. 19f., 22). On the other hand the author fails to escape the construction of some essentializing form of “true” Islam that is largely thought as the sharīʿa based on texts and their correct exegesis by competent ʿulamāʾ. Thus, the author writes of “Islamic misgivings” that “motivated sultans who sought to align their laws with the sharia” (p. 92) or contends that “customary law threatened to choke God’s word and the Prophet’s teaching in prolific and hardy Islamicate weeds” (p. 83).

The reference to Marshall Hodgson’s term “for practices not derived from scripture, but culturally and historically embedded in ‘Islamdom’” (p. 20) is not of much help here if we take the author’s statement regarding the ambivalence and weakness of the foundation of slavery in the canonical texts seriously. Obviously the canonical texts can be interpreted either way and Clarence-Smith indeed spends considerable effort in demonstrating that they were in fact read differently. But then, abolition is something that is not in the texts but brought into the hermeneutic circle from outside as a presupposition, unless we assume that there is one correct reading. This reading, moreover, is in contradiction to the century-long Sunni consensus that, even if it had been “fragile” as the author is at pains to point out, still is demonstrated to have remained largely intact before the 19th century (pp. 22-48). To make the assumption of one correct reading—for open and complex texts that is!—paradoxically brings the author very close to the assumptions of literalism and in the same vein reproduces Orientalist methods of normative and prescriptive reading of Oriental texts. Even if the values that inform this reading are noble-minded and praiseworthy – the contrary to the Orientalist paradigm stating that “reformed Islam isn’t Islam any longer”—the
analytic tension resulting from the author’s interpretation should have been made explicit in order to highlight the resulting predicament instead of allowing it to remain hidden.

In a short note at the end of the text the author expatiates on the moral dimension of scholarly research on the topic that is highly vulnerable to inter-cultural and inter-religious polemics. He is certainly right, when he assures that “serious scholarship is often the first casualty of the heated exchanges that sizzle along the internet, filtering into a varied range of publications” (p. 233).

It should be emphasized that the conceptual problem which I see in his book was not caused by the author’s concern and avid awareness of his ethic responsibility as a scholar but rather by his undeclared decision to accept the presupposition of popular polemic that slavery was mainly a phenomenon to be ascribed to and treated in terms of religion and religious groups. This leads him to dedicate his final chapter to the comparison among different faiths in regard to slavery and its abolition. The program for scholarship on the subject is outlined as the “need for a better understanding of why adherents of different belief systems accepted slavery for so long, and why and how they ceased to do so. Replacing partisan diatribes by sober and self-critical assessments is a priority, which could do much to heal current rifts between religious communities” (p. 233). While that seems to me a principally sound proposition I wonder whether the insistence on belief systems or religions as the framework for the scholarly analysis and on morals as its main guideline that are rather implicitly suggested by the author will prove sufficiently productive for historical analysis. After all slavery was not only a phenomenon that existed on the ideological level but involved massive economic and social interests on the part of the slaveholders.

If popular polemics treat the question of slavery as one pertaining to religions and their adherents does scholarly analysis really have to follow this proposition? The answer to this question is certainly open and the solution cannot lie with the return to the simplistic Marxist paradigm of the economic base of which the superstructure is a mere reflection. Yet it seems to me that the approach chosen in the book is going too far in treating slavery as a phenomenon of the history of religions.

It is the central suggestion of the book that the role played by Islam in the process of abolition of slavery is underestimated (p. 2). The role of Islamic abolitionists was primarily one of background support for abolitionist legislation in changing public Muslim opinion: “As long as significant numbers of Muslims believed that servitude was legitimate, suppression proved to be a labour of Sisyphus” (p. 19). One of the problems here is of course that it is difficult to estimate the actual influence of abolitionist Muslim authors but it would be unfair to blame that lacuna on the book and the study of their ideas would be important in any case.

Nevertheless, questions as that of how social political or economic change of conditions may have influenced the anti-slavery movement are largely passed over with the exception of the question of European influence. Here the thesis of the book is “that the Muslim rejection of servitude was no simple response to Western pressure” (p. 19) but was drawing largely on its own cultural resources.