



Cole, Juan. *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires*. New York: Nation Books, 2018, 336 pp. By Shane Folks.

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, many books have been written to address the relationship between Muhammad, Islam, and religious violence. Some eighteen years later, this issue is far from settled. Juan Cole is the latest scholar to examine this issue with his new book, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires*. Rather than focusing on violence in the Qur'an or in the life of Muhammad, Cole restricts his focus to peace. He notes that the image of the Qur'an and of Muhammad which emerges from a "careful consideration of verses about peace and conciliation" is "180 degrees away from that in Western polemics for the past nearly millennium and a half" and also differs significantly from the "picture of the Prophet in most Muslim commentary" (201–2). To prove his thesis, Cole examines the traditional biography of Muhammad through the lens of the Qur'an (primarily) and selected traditions (secondarily), to present a "reinterpretation" of early Islam which includes the central place of peace in its founding (1).

Summary

A summary of this text must include many speculative and weakly supported claims; however, a brief presentation of Cole's claims is necessary first. Cole follows the traditional Muslim narrative for Muhammad's life, beginning with his work in the trade business before moving to his prophetic encounter, initial ministry and opposition, move to Medina, and eventual conquest of Mecca. The entirety of chapter one, "Sanctuary," is devoted to a detailed description

of Muhammad's physical setting. Late sixth-century Arabia was caught between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empire, two powers locked in a decades-long war. Muhammad grew up surrounded by the threat of war and, according to Cole's description, began to contemplate the future of Arabia. His work as a caravan driver meant that Muhammad was acquainted with Roman law, culture, and languages" (31). Using a variety of primary sources whose reliability is questionable, Cole argues that, contrary to popular belief, Muhammad was literate, well-versed in the Bible, and even familiar with Christian monasticism, Jewish synagogues, and Neoplatonist salons (32). According to Cole, Muhammad's eclectic background molded him into a world observer and a cultural critic, and led him to conclude that the only way to secure safety for the Arabian tribes was to bring lasting peace to the region.

In chapter two, "Peace It Is," Cole describes Muhammad's entry into prophetic ministry and the initial content of his preaching. Consistent with the traditional narrative, he states that Muhammad experienced a supernatural encounter in AD 610, while in a cave at Hira. An angel appeared to him and commanded him to read the first Qur'anic revelation. Although Muhammad was shaken by this encounter, Khadijah and her cousin Waraqa were able to convince Muhammad that he had been called by Allah. He was "unmistakably a holy man" (40). Cole describes Muhammad as "no mere saint," but rather a "messenger of God who sought to revolutionize the spirituality of humankind" (41). Muhammad, Cole claims, preached a simple message of monotheism, condemning polytheism but also recognizing everyone's natural right to choose the religion of his or her choice, as supported by the Qur'anic injunction against coercion of belief (55).

The polytheists of Mecca rejected Muhammad's message of monotheism. In chapter three, "Repel Evil with Good," Cole recounts that Muhammad and his followers began to encounter verbal and sometimes physical opposition. However, Muhammad confronted these confrontations by preaching "ecumenical harmony" (73). He urged his followers to pursue nonviolence in the face of harassment (77). Cole claims that Muhammad led his followers to pray blessings of peace on their persecutors, and that he became "more like a bishop with a congregation than like a solitary holy man" (85). Cole notes that the people who followed Muhammad's early teachings were ecumenically diverse, united only by a strict unitarianism, and comprised of Christians, Jews, and monotheistic tribal members, among others (79). Cole describes the early followers not as Muslims but as "believers" (78–79). Muhammad had not started a new religion, but instead called members of existing religions to monotheistic worship and moral piety.

Following the death of Muhammad's uncle and patron, Abu Talib, opposition to the new "believers' movement" grew violent. Chapter four of Cole's text, "City of the Prophet," is devoted to Muhammad's movement from Mecca to Medina, an event known as the *Hijra*. In AD 622, Muhammad received permission from Allah to emigrate to Medina, and the Jews of Medina invited Muhammad to move there so that he could help settle tribal disputes. Cole writes, "The Prophet did not become the ruler of Medina but rather functioned as a holy man or senator among the diverse clan chiefs who ruled by consensus, aiming to mediate conflicts both inside his own community and outside" (97). In Medina, Muhammad further developed his religious message, preaching a form of "salvific pluralism that included all the monotheist traditions" (98). He created a "community of the saved" that helped preserve "municipal concord" (109). Cole highlights Muhammad's inclusive ecumenical view toward other religions, noting that ecumenism "does not imply a surrender on matters of doctrine but rather implies a willingness to dialogue and coexist"

(98). Even the Qur'an is said to embrace "pluralism on the level of salvation but inclusivism at the level of theology" (117).

In chapter five, "Just War," Cole describes the conflict between Muhammad's Medinan community and the Meccan Quraysh. According to Cole, the fundamental challenge was a blockade to the sacred shrine, the Kaaba. When the Believers were forced to flee Mecca, the Quraysh exiled them and refused the right of pilgrimage to the Kaaba, "God's tabernacle," and access to its blessings (121). Cole claims that this restriction was more detrimental to Muhammad than armed attacks on Medina or its caravans. Spiritual exile was essentially prohibiting the Believers from exercising their religion.

While violence is not encouraged, it is more preferable than allowing the Quraysh to prevent true Believers from worshiping Allah at the Kaaba. According to Cole, the Qur'an is preoccupied with the "ever-present danger" that the Quraysh might succeed in "coercing the Believers' consciences and returning them forcibly to paganism" (137). Based on Surah 2:249–251, Cole observes, "The Qur'an is comparing Muhammad to David here, who is forced to battle a much bigger foe for the sake of preserving his people and safeguarding their access to the latter-day Ark, that is, the Kaaba, within which dwells the Peace of God" (129). Muhammad was forced to wage war, but even that struggle, according to Cole, was waged "in self-defense and in the interests ultimately of restoring tranquility, the late-antique definition of the just war" (130).

Cole describes the eventual takeover of Mecca in chapter six, "The Heart of Mecca." When the Treaty of Hudaibiyya was broken in AD 630, Muhammad and his Medinan community set out to enter Mecca forcefully and worship at the Kaaba. Although later Muslim commentators described the move as a "conquest," Cole notes that "the scripture is quite clear there was no battle

or bloodshed as the Believers entered the holy city” (163). The Believers did not mount a military conquest because Mecca was “full of secret Believers, both men and women, of whose identity even the Prophet remained unaware” (164). Cole summarizes Muhammad’s peaceful victory over Mecca as the “culmination of Abrahamic piety” as seen in his “peaceable approach to the holy city, which forestalled a gory conflict” (167).

Muhammad only lived another two years after his takeover of Mecca, which Cole describes in his final chapter, “Into the Way of Peace.” During this period, Muhammad’s community grew in size and frequently interacted with Jews and Christians. Cole maintains that the Qur’an gives “consistent evidence of good relations with Christians,” although both Jews and Christians erred in their beliefs and rejection of Muhammad (186). Believers were called to treat pagans fairly while simultaneously rejecting their paganism. Monotheists seeking to demonstrate their “superiority to other faiths,” must “show more kindness and philanthropy... not simply claim a superior doctrine or ritual exactitude” (192). Muhammad is even likened to a “John the Baptist figure, calling in the wilderness and showing the people to the way of peace” (195).

Analysis

Cole’s addition to the ongoing debate regarding Islam’s relationship to peace is fraught with problems, but before examining the text, there are two positive features to recognize. First, Cole’s knowledge of both religious and secular primary sources is extensive. Any honest reader would agree that Cole’s bibliography is a resource for further study.

Second, Cole’s text is an example of modern scholarship which seeks to unite Muslims and non-Muslims rather than divide them. In a culture rife with religious tension, particularly with

regard to Islam, Cole attempts to present Islam in general—and Muhammad in particular—in a more favorable light. He observes, “From the Crusades to colonialism, conflicts between Christians and Muslims led to a concentration among writers of European heritage on war and Islam, leaving the dimension of peace and cooperation neglected” (1). Cole desires to highlight positive qualities of Islam which are often overlooked. However, in his attempt to focus on peace, Cole makes a one-sided argument for Islam as a religion of peace and Muhammad as a prophet of peace while deliberately avoiding, dismissing, or reinterpreting accounts of violence in Islam.

While Cole’s book contains helpful information and an excellent bibliography, his text is not without significant problems: extensive use of speculation, a modern agenda, and the questionable use of primary sources. First, Cole devotes a large portion of his book to background information in the attempt to describe the world in which Muhammad lived. The goal is for readers to see Muhammad as an ordinary person with desires, fears, anxieties, etc. However, while primary sources indicate what life was generally like, they do not speak to Muhammad’s individual experience. Cole’s presentation extends beyond historical background to pure speculation about Muhammad’s life. For example, Muhammad “likely” did not approve of plunderers who attacked caravans (12). Muhammad “might” have found Petra’s pools and gardens to be its “most striking feature” (20). “Perhaps” Muhammad stopped off to trade in Jerusalem (21). Muhammad “likely” maintained a summer-fall home in Syria (29). Muhammad “likely” formed a favorable impression of the order and security provided by the Pax Romana (30). Muhammad “may have” suffered humiliation from the Iranian military (68). Muhammad “likely” preached to Zoroastrian audiences (68). None of these claims can be verified, but Cole makes them in order to support his presentation of Muhammad as the hardworking common man called by Allah to bring peace to a region devastated by war.

Despite the lack of historical evidence, Cole presents Muhammad as a bastion of peace. He is not a violent warlord who spread Islam by the sword, but rather, Cole claims, a contemplative observer of world affairs. Cole takes great effort to portray Muhammad as the struggling orphan boy who rises to prominence through hard work, despite the fact that no evidence exists to support that portrait. According to Cole, Muhammad's background of suffering and his ability to observe national affairs led him to determine that the only way forward was through peace. Cole casts Muhammad as a protector of the lowly, a preserver of peace, and a spiritual guide to impressionable searchers.

While Cole does not state his exact reasoning for his detailed yet speculative description of Muhammad, he attempts to counter the traditional view of Muhammad as the religious leader who killed non-Muslims, stole property and wives, and established a movement which conquered much of the known world. The traditional view developed as the result of biographies written by Muslim authors decades or hundreds of years after Muhammad's death, which include accounts of violence, theft, and assassination. In contrast to the traditional narrative, Cole presents Muhammad as a struggling orphan who formed a new family out of believers. He suggests that Muhammad fought warring nations to bring peace and stability to those who had been oppressed and afflicted. Muhammad is not the violent warlord of Islam, as the traditional narrative records, but is rather, according to Cole, a hero and champion of human rights for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The second problem with Cole's text is related to the first: a liberal modern agenda. Cole attempts to present Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Islam in a manner which appeals to modern Western cultural expectations and ideals. Cole hails Muhammad as a champion of human rights

and protector of oppressed people, but he can only do so by avoiding, dismissing, or reinterpreting traditional accounts of Muhammad's violence toward non-Muslims. This selective use of sources allows Cole to claim that Muhammad transformed Medina into a "multicultural" city that championed ethnic and religious diversity (198). In his treatment of the Qur'an, Cole also tries to highlight ideals favored by modern readers. For example, commenting on Surah 49:13 and its recognition of Allah creating both male and female, Cole observes that the Qur'an here "celebrates gender and ethnic diversity as an enrichment of the human experience" (193). Cole even describes Muhammad's march toward Mecca in AD 630 as "more resembling the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 march on Washington than a military campaign" (199). Thus, for Cole, Muhammad and the Qur'an champion ethnic diversity, gender equality, civil rights, and religious pluralism. His biography is a sanitized presentation of Muhammad's life that is more concerned with appealing to Western cultural ideals than remaining consistent with historical evidence.

The third problem with Cole's biography is by far the most troubling: his questionable use of primary sources. His use of sources is "questionable"—not with regard to the number of sources or depth of views represented—but regarding his dependence on the Qur'an and selected traditions. The Qur'an is at best a problematic text on which to base one's biography of Muhammad. It contains little historical context and is not compiled in chronological order. Thus, one cannot be certain that any particular surah is Meccan or Medinan. Moreover, scholars are far from reaching a consensus on the dating and compilation of the Qur'an. Despite these problems, Cole consistently uses the Qur'an, often supplementing the sparse text with his own speculations or by selecting questionable information from later traditions.

Cole's use of tradition to support his biography of Muhammad is the second half of the problem with his "questionable" use of primary sources. Cole utilizes traditions from several primary source authors including Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hashim, and al-Tabari. Each of these authors produced biographical material for Muhammad, yet these documents were produced decades or centuries after Muhammad lived. These traditions and biographies are later documents often written to support Muhammad's prophethood or add context to Qur'anic passages which are unclear. Yet, despite the problem of textual reliability, Cole uses these sources to support his view of Muhammad as a peacemaker.

The problem with Cole's use of these traditions and biographies is his inconsistency. When a tradition supports his view of Muhammad, he considers the tradition historically reliable or at least "plausible." If not, he dismisses or never mentions it. For example, Aisha's testimony regarding Muhammad as a "spiritual seeker" is deemed reliable, as is the testimony of Muhammad's prophetic call (37–39), vocal opposition to Muhammad's peaceful ministry (59), conspiracies to coerce Believers back to paganism (75), and the conversions of pagans and Jews in Medina (96). These accounts support Cole's modern presentation of Muhammad, so they are, according to Cole, reliable.

Conversely, traditions which connect Muhammad to offensive violence, forced conversions, or immoral actions are dismissed. For example, the records of angry Believers beating Quraysh notables are "later embellishments by Muslim storytellers" (54). Muhammad's "raids" on Meccan caravans are labeled thus by "later Muslim historians" who did not realize that the excursions were a "search for rural allies" (108). The records of Jewish prisoners being executed are rejected because the Qur'an mentions nothing about a mass slaying of the men of Khaybar and

“rather suggests that deaths occurred during a battle but that the Believers offered the enemy quarter and took prisoners” (141). Even Muhammad’s move on Mecca in AD 630 is labeled a “conquest” according to “later Muslim commentators,” when in reality it was a peaceful march to the Kaaba (163–4). Finally, Muhammad’s destruction of idols inside the Kaaba was the result of an “iconoclastic enthusiasm” that gripped the city “across the board” (168), rather than something that the Helpers and Emigrants “did to the Meccans.” Any account that records Muhammad’s oppression of non-Muslims is rejected or reinterpreted in way that reframes him as a moral exemplar.

Cole is familiar with a plethora of traditions, biographies, and histories. Yet, he only accepts traditions which support his primary thesis that Muhammad was a “prophet of peace amid the clash of empires.” Records that indicate Muhammad’s involvement in premeditated violence are dismissed, as are records that describe Muhammad massacring prisoners, conquering Mecca, or killing Meccan elites who opposed his prophethood. When Dr. Cole references hagiographical stories of conversions, he notes that they must be “taken with a grain of salt” (96). Unfortunately, Cole does not apply that same caution equally to all traditions and biographies of Muhammad.

Conclusion

Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires is a compelling new biography of Muhammad. It reflects extensive background research and knowledge of sources. Cole’s desire to give modern Western readers a favorable image of Muhammad is admirable, particularly given the volatile nature of current views of Islam. However, in an attempt to make Muhammad more presentable, Cole has sacrificed consistent scholarship. His treatment of Muhammad is overtly

biased and dismissive of records which reflect poorly upon the prophet. As a result, his biography, like many of the sources he cites, must be “taken with a grain of salt.”

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