

## Book Review

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Tim Wallace: *Murphy: What Islam Did for Us*, Watkins Publishing, London, South Asian edition 2008, reviewed by Syed Ali Abbas

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The author's claim that the book is an understanding of Islamic contribution to Western civilization needs a review as to how much Islam is understood by people in Europe who, perhaps some have and others do not have a sympathetic view and perception of Islam. The book divided over five parts discusses Divine religions with their respective pragmatic experiences in political scenario and developing crusade perspective. Tim suggests: "to understand how the relationship between Christianity, Judaism and Islam has degenerated to its present level of intolerance and distrust, "it is necessary to go back in times to examine the common origin, history and development of all three of these great faiths and the changing relationship between them". (Introduction). But Tim does not reflect upon the distrust between Judaism and Christianity which existed for many many centuries in the past and opines from the birth of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H.) and his bearing up in the vicinity where strong Jew and Christian habitats existed ever since the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 A.D.

"The Jewish people including the 24 families of the Mamadol the hereditary high priests of the temple that included the family of Jesus had to flee for their lives". Some Jews then settled in Hijaz in the surroundings of Mecca and Medina besides other towns where the Holy Prophet initiated his Divine Mission of Islam, identical to

the traditions of the past prophets: Abraham and Mosses. However Tim does not mention the limitations of these Divine Missions whether localized or universal, which the Last Prophet (P.B.U.H.) professing Islam claims. At the same time Muslims do believe that all Prophets, from the first to the last, preached Islam. But the followers of the Prophets christianed their religion after the name of their Prophets.

Tim makes little mention of religious impacts upon one another. What really influenced Europe during the early medeaval age was Muslim Culture. Tim observes: "The influence of Moorish Spain on the development of Western culture was indeed profound. For example, the well attended and richly endowed colleges in Andalusia were later to provide a model for those of Oxford and Cambridge in England ... the Umayyad court at Cordova was the most splendid in Europe and provided a heaven for philosophers, poets, artists, mathematicians and astronomers." (P.3). Tim adds: "Islamic Spain also gave Europe an architectural and artistic heritage that is still a wonder to the modern world. These were all fruits of spiritual insight, sacred gnosis that followed from the Islamic mystical traditions and that were passed on to Christian Europe via the Rex Deus families who claimed to be descended from the 24 high priestly families in Jerusalem." How? Tim makes no mention.

Here, Tim is partly right. The basic knowledge of different disciplines, did come out of the Islamic womb, the source being the Holy Quran and the Traditions. It was examined in some details by scholars and scientists at Kufa, Basra, Damascus and Cordova. Islamic mysticism which developed in the second century of Hijra, being a result of perpetual political conflicts in the Muslim polity, was infact a personal pursuit in the understanding of the Almighty Allah and his Maarifat, which gradually turned it to philosophies of Pantheism and Monotheism. Europe was

indeed influenced by these ideas which are reflected in Italian Vico's *Ecology of Spirit* and other German Romantic Thinkers (Collingwood: *Idea of History*). But Islamic mysticism was not cynicism. It had positive gestures toward love, sacrifice and devotion objected to serve others which remained the basic attraction for the people to follow.

Tim has also examined some theories about Egyptian Pyramids. He has noted the experiences and suggestion of Professor Gaston Maspero and Professor I.E.S. Edwards of British Museum, who consider the Hieroglyphic Text of the Pyramids to the Egyptian pre-historic age. John Anthony West claims that Egyptian civilization was not a development, it was a legacy. (P.8.). Another Egyptologist William Mathew Flinder Petrie advanced the Dynastic Theory. He evolved this theory after excavation of over 2000 pre-dynastic graves at Nakada in 1893-4, and so did Flinder Petrie and Jama Quibal, tracing from the graves some Mesopotamian pottery etc. But, Tim, noting quite a few more theories on the Pyramids has perhaps overlooked an important work of Father Martin who in his *Pyramid of Egypt*, London 1877, traces the history of the Divine Prophets from Noah to Jesus Christ, with time measurement calculation though Pyramid structure and their inner link through stairs, symbolizing with the time span in between. (I have had an opportunity to read it after I found a book of Syed Hussain in Urdu on *Ahram-i-Misr: Haqiqat-i-Maarifat*, (Maktaba-i-Yousafi, Delhi: 1926) who after using the calculations of Father Martin carried the lineage of the Prophets till the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). However, there is little doubt in the theory that the Pyramids, its sacred text and its symmetrical construction had some spiritual message to convey which may some time be revealed in future for the posterity. John Taylor do confirms this perception in his *A Case of*

Science, Pseudo Science and Religion Pyramidology (see [www.GreatGreen.com/Pyramid.hem](http://www.GreatGreen.com/Pyramid.hem)).

Tim also includes King Namrood of Egypt amongst the Pharaohs, which is not identified by Muslim traditions recorded in early universal histories like al-Tabri and others. He also traces traditions from Israeliyat (from the Old Testament) claiming that Abraham and Sara were from the same father but different mothers. (P.14) Hajar is also noted by Tim and her exile from Egypt, without a mention of her settlement near Mecca, showing also the sacrifice of Isaac offered, whom God saved by a lamb. Moses is also said to be the progeny of the Pharaoh (P.17) which is contrary to the Muslim traditions and precepts. The first two parts of the Book are thus concentrated on the beginning and evolution of Judaism and Christianity.

At the beginning of part three: The Foundations of the World of Islam, what Tim maintains about Islam is most remarkable. He says: “Unlike Christianity, which by now was well established in Europe, the religion born among the Arab people never developed a hierarchy of priests corrupted by power and wealth. The simplicity of the faith was such that all the adherents sought to do was to submit themselves to the will of God as disclosed by the Holy Quran”. (P.79).

Tim’s explanation of the early Islam in the midst of the Jew settlements around Mecca and Yathrib (Medina) with first revelation on the Hira mountain and then gradually receiving the Message of Allah touching the hearts of the Quraish, the tribe of the Holy Prophet. Tim borrows his material on these details from an English orientalist Karen Armstrong (Muhammad, San Francisco, 1993) who occasionally compare Muhammad’s (P.B.U.H.) early experiences, particularly the Me’raj, identical to Jewish Hekkalot’s traditions, disbelieving them as human

experiences in allowing doubts in their authenticity. (P.85). But Tim also projects some messages in their spirit quoting “the new scripture instructed Muslims to use their God given powers of reason to decipher these ‘signs’ of Devine Messages an instruction that united all Muslims with a healthy attitude to both intellectual endeavor and curiosity, one that led to a remarkable development of the study of natural science that was fully in keeping with God’s Will” (P.87). What was perhaps difficult to visualize for Tim, was the Quran’s perception of Knowledge and its embodiment in the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) No other prophet was given the knowledge of the creation of Universe and its sustenance force except him, which claim is identified by the Holy tradition “I am the city of knowledge”. This knowledge was reflected besides others, from the school of Medina, Kufa, Baghdad, Damascus and Mashad.

But Tim’s description of Muslim conquests, “By 665 C.E, a little over 20 years after the Prophet’s (P.B.U.H.) death, the empire of Islam stretched from Kabul in the east to Tripoli in the West; from the Southern shores of Arabia to the greater part of the present day Turkey in the north. It continued to spread until it stretched from the Atlantic coast of North Africa right across the Middle East to the borders of the Chinese Empire”, (P90) is true. But how did those conquests create the light of scientific and socio-cultural knowledge which spread in Europe and the adjoining countries, and how and from where did it emanate in Arabian peninsula and when, are question which still need an answer. The conquests are by no means a source of knowledge, except cultural exchanges between different racial group including economic activity developed during the course of time. Muslim conquests were not lonely enterprises. There had been various adventures of great merit in different parts of the world without the slightest show of the spread of enlightenment

which Muslims caused and successfully effected in imparting knowledge. The conquest of the Alexander the Great and Chingaz Khan are on record, which only helped in spreading cultural traits rather than basic scientific and human knowledge and values.

Tim suggests that “since all the people in the Muslim’s conquered territory had to learn Arabic the language of the Quran, it encouraged the growth of the knowledge of natural sciences. This led to a rapid rise in literacy ... so the empire of Islam rapidly acquired a degree of sophistication and learning that was not to be equal, much less excelled, by the Christian West for nearly nine centuries,” (P.95) Tim makes no mention of the Baghdad School founded by the Caliph Haroon-al-Rasheed wherefrom the scientific knowledge of Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, medicine, Astrology, besides religious philosophy, passed on to Europe, though Syria and Egypt. The Greek philosophical works trace some identity of Greek and Islamic thought, claimed by western writers (George Lenczowski: *The Greek and Islamic Traditions*, New York, 1973).

Academic activity and thirst for knowledge turned Cordova also as the centre for learning particularly after the beginning of the Caliphate of Abdur Rehman III who had a craze for the literate people of various disciplines, such as Geography, Agriculture, Irrigation, Astronomy Medicine, and Mathematics. More so, as Tim suggests, “with the expulsion of the persecuted Nestorian scholars from Europe as a result of Christian intolerance, the Arab world had become home to them. Cordova now took root and flourished in various disciplines, including Medicine, (P.108) Cultural roots got more stronger, as the Arab-European interaction and intellectual exchanges caused some extraordinary architectural activity in Cordova, particularly the second largest mosque in Islam built

between 785 and 980 A.D., besides other industries of weapons, healthgoods, and silk which distinguished the Umayyad Capital in Spain, uninterrupted from outside. Granada, too, developed like Cordova in literary activity and was renowned in Europe. Tim's perception of the Prophethood borrowed from the European literature was different. Quoting from Ibn-e-Arabi (1165-2290 A.D.) who fathered the mystic philosophy of Pantheism, already discussed in the previous lines; Tim suggests that the Holy Prophet's ascendancy to Heavens (the Me'raj) was his mystical journey. Tim compares that with the Jew mystical experiences, and it profoundly influenced European thinkers as Friar Roger Bacon, Dante, Averroës, and Chauser. (P.113) This was a result of translations of Muslim scholarly literature translated into Latin which later on gave birth to the Renaissance in Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Richard Fletcher, the English historian suggests, "This was a process which significance in the intellectual history of the world would be hard to exaggerate"(P.117) Tim observes: "The vast Islamic storehouse of intellectual excellence was from un-exhausted tradition continued in every field of scholarly endeavor. Probably the most prolific of the Christian translators was General of Gremona who spent nearly 50 years in Toledo from 1140 till 1187 A.D. having translated 90 works form Arabic to Latin, more than half of them dealt with Mathematics, Astronomy and related sciences, besides Medicine, Philosophy and Logic. (P.120).

Part IV of the Book with all its Chapters deal with the growing hatred against the Muslims in Europe which followed the call to crusade. How did it develop and why suddenly Europe was set ablazed in the holy war are questions unanswered in most of the literature on Crusades and so does in Tim's world. Tim does carry this dissension to the modern day fundamentalism and extremist

movements among the Muslims including Al-Qaida and Usama bin Laden. But Tim is absolutely quite on the causes of these developments. Was it a result of the regular and consistent conversion to Islam which initially began with the Spanish conquests by Muslims and with increased momentum after the Renaissance, Eastern Europe developed Muslim strong cultural habitats, more so under Ottoman expansions. With the decline and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire an era of retaliation began and Muslims all over the regions of Western colonization remained a prey to the Western mechanization, whether in Yugoslavia, Palestine or Kashmir. Iraq and Afghanistan were only opportunities, provided to the West for holding ground to exploit economic and energy resources, hidden in the two countries. How most of the Muslim countries, including Pakistan, and some of the Arab countries, are obliged to stand behind the Western global policies, is well known and widely criticized, too.

The Book “What Islam Did for Us” seems to be an apology to the Western policies against Islam, knowing well, of the little impact such works can carry on the state policies and the think tanks in U.S.A., England and Europe.