John Ricardo I. "Juan" Cole (born October 23, 1952) is an American academic and commentator on the modern Middle East and South Asia. He is a professor of history and director of the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan.

Cole became interested in Islam and Arabic while a teenager living in Eritrea. He studied Arabic at Northwestern University, in Beirut, at the American University in Cairo, and at the University of California, Los Angeles; his study included classical historical, theological and philosophical texts and classical and modern literature. He speaks Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and can read Ottoman Turkish. He also knows French, German and Spanish.
Mirnes KOVAČ

MUHAMMED IZMEĐU ISTOKA I ZAPADA

Juan Cole, Muhammed - Poslanik mira usred sukoba imperija,

MUHAMMAD BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Juan Cole, Muhammad - Prophet of Peace in Amid of the Clash of Empires,
Sarajevo, Kupola, 2020, pp. 261.
Early October of 2020 saw the publishing of my translation of the book Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires¹ by US historian Juan Cole, Professor of History at the University of Michigan, editor and initiator of the weblog Informed Comment, author of a great number of studies concerning the history and civilization of the Middle East. According to the editorial subtitle of the publisher, Sarajevo-based Kupola, which published this book within its edition Stubovi vremena, it is a “Biography of the Prophet, a.s., as a harbinger of tolerance and peace amid the Byzantine-Persian wars”.

Between rigid rationalism and rigid traditionalism

Hundreds of biographies of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, peace be upon him, have been written by Muslims, as well as Western authors. The dominant feature of Muhammad's, a.s., biographies that have been written by Muslims since early centuries is the reliance upon the Islamic tradition, as well as on a distinctive collective emotion that the authors have embedded into their writings as an inevitable part of their human experience and belief. On the other hand, the prevailing feature of Muhammad's biographies that have been written by non-Muslim authors over centuries, particularly since the Middle Ages onward, is the advocating of a rational and often selective approach, typically burdened by bias, distrust, and even open rivalry and animosity. Thus, for fourteen centuries, the destiny of writing about the Prophet of Islam has actually been stuck “amid the conflict” between rigid Western rationalism, threat and animosity, and rigid Eastern traditionalism, protectionism and empathetic emotion, which all together considerably transcend the personality of the last Divine messenger.

Founders of modern liberal thought, such as the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, were extremely cautious about “tradition and customs”, and rejected them as factors that hinder human individual and social progress”, while modern Muslim scholars speak of the “healthy tradition”, authentic dedication that can help liberation from intellectual idolatry: “Ignorance is essentially pagan, since it does not plant ideas, but rather elevates idols,” was written by Bennabi.³

In recent times, a great number of books on the life and mission of the Prophet of Islam have appeared in the West. Certainly, many of them are still burdened with bias on Islam and Muslims, since they were written from the position of Western civilizational superiority, and almost as a rule lack authentic knowledge of the history, culture and civilization of the central regions of Islam. However, together with the development of separate academic disciplines at Western universities that

¹ Originally published by Bold Type Books, 2018.
study Islamic culture, history and civilization and, since recently, the Middle East as a geopolitical region, we are witnessing the appearance of more realistic and impartial books by Western authors about Muhammad as the founder of one of the greatest world religions, whose followers include an increasing number of citizens of Western societies.

Although the book Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires was written for Western readers, it is certainly also useful for Muslims, since despite all the possible disagreements, its point of view, perspective and method expand horizons, which can help Muslims when viewing Muhammad’s, a.s. personality to perceive some important dimensions which, “due to certain social barriers that hamper their understanding of their own problems”, they have not been able to observe – which is pointed out by Maxime Rodinson, a prominent French Islamologist who also wrote a book about Muhammad. Thus, in the introduction of his book Islam and Capitalism, Rodinson points out that his book “is written with the high ambition to be of service to intellectuals in the countries that belong to the Muslim faith and civilization, by helping them to understand their situation”.

In addition, Maxime Rodinson wrote: “It is not that I presume myself superior, by virtue of being European, to the best among them in learning or intelligence. I lay claim to no advantage of that sort. It is merely that circumstances have enabled me to escape sooner than them from certain social impediments that obstruct their understanding of their own problems. I have had the good fortune to be given free access to the acquisition of a knowledge of their past that is clear of myths, and I have sought to rid myself of the myths that are hindrances to understanding their present. It must be added that I am in a position to speak out and say what they are often obliged to keep to themselves. This is a freedom that has to be paid for, like all freedoms, but the price, in my case, is not excessive, whereas they, generally speaking, have to pay a great deal more for it”.

Shattering the contemporary pagan discourse

Naturally, the increasing presence and visibility of Muslims in the West since the late 1980s has raised the public debate on the role and position of Muslims as citizens in liberal democratic societies, although there have also been frequent fierce conflicts and affairs that launched, on the international scene, a new form of hatred based on religious affiliation – islamophobia. At present, this form of hatred is recognized as a threat to European societies, besides antisemitism, which resulted in the Holocaust in Europe in the early 20th century. It is because of the grave consequences resulting from such a discourse, particularly for Muslims in the West, that books such as this one by US historian Juan Cole are more than welcome.

Indeed, the book by Juan Cole about Muhammad as a prophet of peace amid the clash of empires is aimed at shattering the contemporary pagan discourse of ignorance about the Prophet of Islam, both in the West and in the East. As the author himself underlines in the foreword, “this book puts forward a reinterpretation of early Islam as a movement strongly inflected with values of peacemaking that was reacting against the slaughter of the decades-long war and attendant religious strife”.

Besides putting Muhammad’s mission within the context of the “world wars” of the time, between the two dominant empires of the contemporary “center of the world”, Cole also interprets the Qur’an within this historical context, and points out that his view is not “trying to explain what Muslims believe about their scripture”.

Through seven chapters written in understandable language and with an appealing style, the author often compares the ideas, concepts and regulations of Islam to the religious and secular practices and beliefs existing at the time, which provides readers with a broader and different perspective on the circumstances in which Islam matured. Cole thoroughly analyzes the language and compares the main Qur’an sections on peace, clearly pointing out that the option of peace, i.e. resolution of conflict, was the primary choice and specialty of Muhammad the Prophet. “He repeatedly sued for peace with a bellicose Mecca, but when that failed he organized Medina for self-defense in the face of a determined pagan foe. The Qur’an

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insists that aggressive warfare is wrong and that if the enemy seeks an armistice, Muslims are bound to accept the entreaty. This disallowing of aggressive war and search for a resolution even in the midst of violent conflict justifies the title “prophet of peace”, even if Muhammad was occasionally forced into a defensive campaign.” (12)

The believers’ community in Mecca was of “peaceful character”, and “the Qur’an advocates ‘preferential nonviolence’, prioritizing peaceful approaches to conflict resolution where at all possible” (75) The author goes on to say: “The Qur’an sees peace as a virtue and a blessing and as one of the benefits of admission to paradise. It depicts the assembly of the raised in heaven as a dynamic community and not just a passive recipient of God’s grace. The spiritual Vanguard repose on couch-like thrones facing one another, communing, wishing each other peace. Angels, he preached, will greet those upright persons with blessings of peace on their arrival in the next world. The denizens will wish one another peace. The apex of heaven’s delectations is the blessing, bestowed by the voice of God, of peace and well-being.” (78) He also points out: ”Muhammad taught this-worldly magnanimity even more toward unreconstructed polytheists.” (85)

When describing the details of conflicts and armed struggles during Muhammad’s, a.s., prophetic mission, Cole says: “The Qur’an portrays the turn of Muhammad and his Believers to warfare with militant pagan Mecca as a search for restitution for serious wrongs and as self-defense.” (180) These conflicts were a necessity which Muhammad, with the force of his personality and leadership, tried to frame in the rules of just warfare aimed not at imperial expansion but rather at self-defense. “In one of the greatest ironies of history, Muhammad, who had preached returning evil with good and praying for peace for one’s foes, had violent conflict thrust upon him in the last third of his prophetic career. The Qur’an maintains that he waged even that struggle, however, in self-defense and in the interests ultimately of restoring tranquility, the late-antique definition of the just war.” (164) Struggles in self-defense were also “reacting against civil and property wrongs as well as against pressuring individuals over their internal beliefs.” (181)

Indeed, many Muslim authors will not agree with Cole’s claims; however, keeping in mind the sources, which include both the traditional Islamic and the available Roman and Sassanid sources, this book certainly deserves attention due to the methodology of critical questioning and reading of the early history of Islam. It is particularly important in the context of present distinctive attempts to impose the “pagan discourse” of ignorance and prejudices, and to present Islam as a violent religion and Prophet Muhammad as the inspirer of crime and hatred. Besides, an important aspect of the book pertains to the highlighting of relations between the different religious communities which resided on the Arabian Peninsula in Late Antiquity, when prophet Muhammad appeared. In addition, Cole uses arguments to challenge both some Orientalist and some early Muslim narratives that are frequently taken for granted as arguments in approaches to the Prophet’s personality.
ILLUSTRATION - A Qur'an Scroll. Early Qajar Persia, 1795-96. (Christie’s, lot 184/2016). Sūra Al-Kahf, Arabic manuscript on fine paper, each line in naskh script within gold rules, with a red accentuation of certain textual content, sura headings in red thuluth script within gold cartouche, framed with gold rules, in fine silver Qur'an case engraved with the Throne Verse.