

**Muhammad's Heirs:  
The Rise of Muslim Scholarly Communities, 622-950**

*Jonathan E. Brockopp*

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*Muhammad's Heirs: The Rise of Muslim Scholarly Communities*, by Jonathan E. Brockopp of Penn State University, begins anecdotally with an encounter with Moroccan students at the "University of Fez-Sais" (apparently the College of Literature, *Kulliyat al-Adab*). In this encounter the author challenges students' presumptive trust in the scholastic honesty of classical Muslim scholars, like Qadi Iyad b. Musa (d. 544/1149). Brockopp claims that Qadi Iyad "subtly manipulated" the stories of scholars in order to "fulfill his notion of what a great legal scholar should be" (1). Building on this contention, Brockopp endeavors in *Muhammad's Heirs* to "reconstruct the history of Muslim scholars based primarily on documentary sources" (2) and "to

imagine Islam without the scholarly institutions that arose only centuries after Muhammad's death" (3).

Biographical works on Muslim scholars give the general impression that religious and scholarly "classes" were immediately known to the pioneer generations and have always been christened as Islam's indispensable and sole charismatic leadership. Brockopp argues the contrary, namely that for approximately the first two centuries of Islamic history there was no established class or community of scholars with an authoritative voice. Despite being subversive of Muslim scholarly authority, Brockopp's true goal appears to be an effort to offer a more accurate picture of early Islamic history and the way that the early community organically evolved to see religious scholars as a special class whose authority is to be appealed to by both the governed and governors.

The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters, followed by an appendix, bibliography, and index. For his conclusions Brockopp relies on the thirty earliest Arabic literary manuscripts which can comfortably be dated prior to 300 AH, and especially on the twenty-three "Kairouan manuscripts" taken from the publications of Miklos Muranyi, Joseph Schacht, and Nejmeddine Hentati. The Maliki School of law and the contributions of its scholars feature prominently in these manuscripts.

In his introduction, after highlighting the failings of both the "descriptive approach" to Islamic history and that of revisionists who charge the early community of being nothing more than a heretical offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Brockopp offers a reconciliation: the early Muslims (622-680 CE) were an ideologically dispersed community, who likely held variant views about the status and importance of Muhammad (7-8). They lived as a numerical minority "within established Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish religious worlds" (16). The lack of ideological coherence had very much to do with the fact that Muslim scholarly communities only crystallized after the early ninth century (21). Until then, people from various backgrounds were viewed as guides for the community, including "direct descendants of the Prophet, political leaders, Sufi mystics, and various other sorts of charismatic leaders" (4).

Be it coinage, the methods and language of taxation, building techniques, governing style, or religious culture, the first two centuries following the Prophet's death did not undergo much societal change that would make Muslims look clearly distinct from their religious predecessors (31). In other words, the Byzantine, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and other worlds delimited the sociocultural expression of the Islamic world to the extent that an

outsider might mistake the new Muslim religion to be nothing more than a heretical offshoot of the biblical traditions. The first major shift toward a clearly distinct “Islamic” cultural expression, by Brockopp’s account, began when the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd Al-Malik b. Marwan introduced distinct Islamic coins (77/696-697) which excluded the religious markers of Christianity and Zoroastrianism (unlike earlier coins used by Muslims).

The formation of the Muslim scholarly class and its crystallization during the Abbasid period further legitimized the unique “Muslim” and “Islamic” identity of the community. The promulgation of prophetic traditions like “Scholars are the heirs of the prophets” and “Seek knowledge even unto China” reinforced a culture of scholarly charisma as distinct from political leadership after an earlier period when they were inseparable. Once crystallized, writers were then able to project that authority retroactively into the past, an example of the “subtle manipulation” of which Brockopp accuses Qadi Iyad and other authors of biographical dictionaries. For Brockopp, “Any narrative (premodern or modern) that presents a unified notion of “Islam” with clear boundaries, and a singular perception of history must therefore be considered an artificial construction” (94).

Brockopp’s conclusion relies heavily on a special definition of “scholarly community” and the rejection of the existence of “books” prior to the early ninth century. While “literary works” existed during the first two centuries of Islam’s history, books proper—curricular works meant to transmit a legacy of commonly held views—did not. Brockopp holds that a scholarly community is a prerequisite for books. A book for him is “a text written in a uniform style in a single effort and then passed on to other scholars verbatim.” He continues, “To have books therefore means to have a community that can maintain the discipline necessary for the faithful transmission of the texts” (17). For these reasons, he dubs those living between 622-680 CE as “proto-scholars,” while genuine scholarly communities only crystallize in the early ninth century during the Abbasid dynasty.

That the early community apparently relied heavily on Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian sociopolitical and cultural artifacts prior to ‘Abd Al-Malik’s currency innovation and the later ascendancy of the scholarly class speaks of the success of an effort to overcome associations with being the heirs of the “prophets” (plural)—a status that ostensibly maintains religio-cultural continuity between the Abrahamic faiths—to the renewed status as heirs of the “prophet” (singular), which marks a clean break between them and the uniqueness of the Islamic faith tradition (198). It is

precisely this notion that Brockopp seeks to convey through the book's title, *Muhammad's Heirs*.

These insights are very important for contemporary scholarship. They are particularly helpful in identifying the proper connotations of Qur'anic phrases like *al-'ulama'* (the learned) and *ahl al-dhikr* (people of the reminder). If scholarly communities did not exist during the prophetic era, then to translate *'ulama'* as "scholars" instead of merely "the learned" is anachronistic. The same applies for *ahl al-dhikr*, whose context as mentioned in Q 16:43 and Q 21:7 more directly refers to Jews and Christians of the prophetic era, rather than Muslim scholars as imagined by many today.

Brockopp's research brilliantly discloses anachronistic projections by classical authors of biographical dictionaries and those living today who have imbibed those misapprehensions. Yet Brockopp's allegation of "subtle manipulation" slides easily into a claim about "intentional corruption," when it is equally possible that scholars like Qadi Iyad b. Musa may have inherited a framework that led them to make such claims.

Brockopp's work is both valuable and controversial, but not only because it subverts the historical authority of Muslim scholars. It is also diversifies and democratizes charismatic authority. If charisma during the pioneer period was not monopolized by jurists and theologians, then Sufis, mystics, progressives, and reformists today may also have legitimate authority. Yet so too similar legitimacy and authority concerning claims of orthodoxy would then be afforded to the views of extremists and political leaders. These may be the inescapable consequences of historical criticism and reconstruction. Otherwise, even while recognizing that it was a later, sociological development (not a natural result from the death of the Prophet), reinforcing the unique role and authority of the scholarly class may be the only viable option toward the maintenance of social harmony.

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