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Commentary and Reply

On “A Critical But Missing Piece . . .”

JAMES TURNER JOHNSON

This commentary is in response to Colonel Adam Oler’s article “A Critical But Missing Piece: Educating Our Professional Military on the History of Islam” published in the Spring 2011 issue of Parameters (vol. 41, no. 1).

I strongly back the message of Colonel Adam Oler’s article in the Spring 2011 issue of *Parameters*. The quotation from Aristotle at the beginning could well be a motto for my own work and an introduction to my latest book, subtitled *The Use of History for Thinking about Morality and War*. There is a great lack of knowledge among Americans on the historical development of Islam and the Islamic tradition on war in particular. This lack of knowledge has affected us negatively.

Oler is right on target to advocate the study of the history of Islam at the war college level. I think it also belongs in the service academy curricula, though because of the tightness of those curricula it would necessarily have to be a compact unit. Oler’s insistence that what he proposes not include the study of Islam as religion is, though, misplaced, for one cannot really study the history of Islam without taking into account the religion of Islam in its historical development. Islam the religion is there at every stage.

To take some examples from Oler’s argument, he rightly points to the need to understand the Shia-Sunni difference, but this is a religious difference that cannot be understood historically without being understood religiously. Oler would have the first section of his proposed course be on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, but all the existing records on this are religious in nature, and scholarship on it is closely guarded by religious authorities. Contemporary radical Islamists use Ibn Taymiyya’s reaction to the Mongols as providing warrant for their own views toward the West, and this is by far not taken as the normative meaning of Sharia by the Muslim majority.

Oler’s citations provide a possible bibliography for studying the history of Islam. I would like to add two other important sources: John Kelsay’s *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, and Ibn Khaldun’s *The Muqaddimah*. Kelsay’s book follows history from the life of Muhammad and his companions to present-day arguments over the present and future of Islam by following the course of Sharia reasoning. The medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun’s monumental work *The Muqaddimah* takes readers inside the world whose history it treats.

Professor James Turner Johnson is a major writer on the ethics of war and just war theory. He has published numerous books on the subject and is currently serving as a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religion at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

The Author Replies

ADAM OLER

Professor Johnson is absolutely correct to emphasize that one cannot study Islamic history without incorporating the critical role of religion. Indeed, several of the works I cite emphasize that a key distinction between Muslim and Western societies is the absence of church and state separation in the Islamic tradition. Teaching the history of Islam without mentioning the role of religion would be akin to teaching about the Reformation without touching upon the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. Doing so would be a disservice, and Professor Johnson rightly points this out. That said, I consider my underlying caution worthy of continued deliberation.

As the discourse over the so-called Mosque at Ground Zero reaffirms, a great deal of emotion persists on religious aspects of the current East-West divide. My underlying point—perhaps too sweepingly stated in the article—is that a course on Middle East history should steer clear of religious debates. Otherwise, I fear any impetus to teach this most-vital period of history will be placed in the “too hard to do” category. I would also offer that Professor Johnson’s suggestion that a Middle East history course incorporate Ibn Khaldun’s *The Muqaddimah* be favorably considered by course directors, provided time allows. Reading the fourteenth century Khaldun would further highlight the enormous contributions Islamic society made to the study of history, economics, and historiography. Fortunately, *The Muqaddimah* is in publication, and thus still readily accessible.

On the specific subject of religion’s primary role in the development of Muslim society, I would argue that Professor Noah Feldman’s *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* is invaluable. Professor Feldman challenges some of the common preconceptions about Sharia law, as well as the supposed incompatibility of Islam with an internally balanced system of government. Anyone shaping US policy in the region would benefit from his perspective.

Commentary & Reply Submissions

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