



Graham Fuller. *A World Without Islam*. London: Little, Brown and Company, 2010. Paperback £13.99; pp. 336. ISBN-13: 978-0316041195

Reviewed by Gilbert Ramsay
University of St Andrews
St Andrews, UK

Is Islam inherently in conflict with democracy, with liberalism, with ‘the West’? Or is Islam just a façade for the real issues that are at stake? This question has been asked and answered so many times in the past twenty years or so (usually in favour of the latter view) that authors now have to work ever harder for new angles on the subject. In *A World Without Islam*, Graham Fuller takes the big question to its logical conclusion. What if Islam had never existed at all?

The idea is, if nothing else, provocative. Interesting counterfactuals abound in Middle Eastern history. Islam took over a Late Roman Levant which was already theologically at odds with Constantinople. Does that mean that government agencies might today be warning of the prospect of suicide attacks by radical ‘home grown’ Syriac Orthodox? Had Genghis Khan converted to Nestorian Christianity (as it was rumoured he might), and thus evaded assimilation by conversion, would we now be told that the Mongol inheritance of Middle Eastern countries predisposed them to tribalism and violence?

Fuller acknowledges such possibilities. But – perhaps a bit deceptively – this isn’t really a book of alternative history. This may be for the best. Such thought experiments make for fun essays, but it seems questionable that the exercise could offer the basis for a whole book. The problem, however, is that Fuller also fails really to seize on the important questions that his speculation might raise. Instead what we get is wishy-washy history and bland apologetic.

Fuller’s intentions are interesting. He perceives the chance to creatively reappraise the history of the region by starting with everything left once Islam itself is subtracted. Is the contemporary relationship of Western countries with the Middle East really the legacy of ancient, pre-Islamic history? Or is this invented tradition which merely clothes geopolitical interest? Or are the enduring geo-strategic situations of the Middle East and Europe products of some fundamental engine of history which has, in turn, become written into culture? These are questions which have provoked some of the greatest minds on both sides of the putative divide right back to Ibn Khaldun and even (perhaps in itself evidence for Fuller’s case), Herodotus. Moreover, simply asking them challenges us to think about what it really means to be anti-essentialist. Is it actually determinism by ‘Islam’ which we are concerned about, or is it ‘Islamic culture’ (an argument whose circularity Roy has usefully drawn attention to).¹

Unfortunately, Fuller seems almost afraid of exploring the big ideas his premise invokes. Instead of the bold argument we are promised, what we mostly get is narrative history – of a rather sweeping, opinionated kind. For example, we learn on page 80 that Sixth century Syrian resentment of Byzantium had everything, apparently, to do with long-term cultural hatreds, and nothing to do with more immediate factors (such as brutal, draining wars with the neighbouring Sassanian Persian

¹ O. Roy, (trans. C Volk) *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1994

Empire). Indeed, a few lines later (p. 81), we are told about the third century warrior queen Zenobia's hostility to Rome that 'tellingly, she was descended from nobility in Carthage - another city that famously nurtured historical hatred of its chief Mediterranean rival, Rome'. Firstly, there is no evidence that Zenobia was really of Carthaginian ancestry. She liked to claim descent from the mythical queen Dido, but this says more about her *contemporary* rivalry with Rome (framed, incidentally, in terms of *Roman* mythology) than any real feelings of cultural animosity. Secondly, for what it is worth, Carthage (a completely new city, built on the site of Rome's one time rival, which had been razed to the ground), had at this time been a loyal Roman city and capital of the imperial province of Africa for four hundred years. It is perhaps this casual attitude to the telescoping of history and the reifying of retrospectively invented tradition which leads Fuller to subtitle a chapter on Russia's present day relations with its Muslim minorities 'Byzantium lives!'

Whether substituting cultural determinism for theological determinism is really much of a step forward is, of course, moot. After all, Western popular culture seems perfectly capable of dreaming up the same negative orientalist stereotypes for pre-Islamic periods as for post-Islamic ones. But having set off down this road, one might at least expect some interesting scenery on the way. Unfortunately, Fuller goes on to miss many of the more interesting points that this line of argument might suggest. He is eager to point out that Islam shares many similarities with Christianity and Judaism. No one denies it. But such is his reverence for orthodox Muslim accounts of Islamic history that he largely bypasses a whole school of important, if controversial, revisionism which might, at the least have added some zest to his case. According to this, Islam did not spring fully formed from the revelations and deeds of its prophet, but rather in a process of accretion, taking place over roughly two centuries, in which an elite of Arab conquerors gradually combined elements of Christianity and Judaism, together with a miscellany of their own oracular heritage, to produce a partially retrofitted tradition which, expediently, helped guard against cultural assimilation into the conquered. If so, the very origins of Islam might be said to have their roots in the underlying political culture of the Middle East, rather than vice versa. Fuller is happy to note similarities between some strands of late antique Christian thought and Islam. But he prefers to use this as a jumping off point for lambasting the small mindedness of those who would fight over mere details in religion. This might be useful rhetoric, but it seems like poor argumentation. After all, even the most dyed in the wool essentialist would hardly deny the *similarities* between monotheistic religions. The question is where the *differences* come from, and whether they actually matter.

Indeed, for a book with such an imaginative premise, the fundamental flaw in this work is lack of imagination. Ironically, given his liberal vision, Fuller seems so wrapped up in his own world view that he cannot even countenance the possibility that there could be any truth to the position against which he is arguing. As a result, he seems not to see the need to actually make his case. For instance, he flatly asserts on numerous occasions that where religion seems to be a source of unpleasantness, it is inevitably the result of political interference. 'It is really the *cultural glue of theology* - any theology - that sustains a community on an ethnic and religious basis', he tells us. 'The religion can be Judaism, Christianity or Islam; it doesn't really matter' (p. 37). True religion is all about 'personal life, philosophy and conduct' (p.38). If it gets nasty, then it must be 'the exploitation of religion for secular ends'. (p.12). Without the state, theological decisions would merely be about 'obscure proceedings of theologians sitting solemnly in council' (p.48) and, in any case, these wouldn't matter very much as 'heresy gets a bad rap', but is actually 'in the eye of the beholder' (p.38). Fair enough. But Fuller offers no explanation for why things must be this way round (though much later he nods to the issue as a 'chicken and egg problem'- p. 62). Nor does he recognise any possible objection. After all, if the specificities of religion matter so little, if politics always trumps it, then why did the Roman emperor Diocletian's attempt to impose an official version of paganism fail, while his successor, Constantine, was able to establish an already unstoppable looking tide of Christianity as the state religion of the empire? For scholars like

Rodney Stark monotheistic religions like Christianity have built-in sociological characteristics which help to ensure their viral success.² Fuller barely even recognises that such views exist.

By parts two and three of the book, Fuller has – it seems – more or less abandoned the entire project. In presenting sweeping chapters on the status of Muslims in rival Huntingtonian ‘civilisations’ of Russia, India, China and the West and on Islam’s troubled encounter with modernity, Fuller offers a decent synthesis, but very little that is original. The bold imaginary of a ‘world without Islam’ has decayed to yet another well-meaning refutation of essentialist claims about Islam. What would the world be like without this book? Not much different, one has to assume.

² R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997