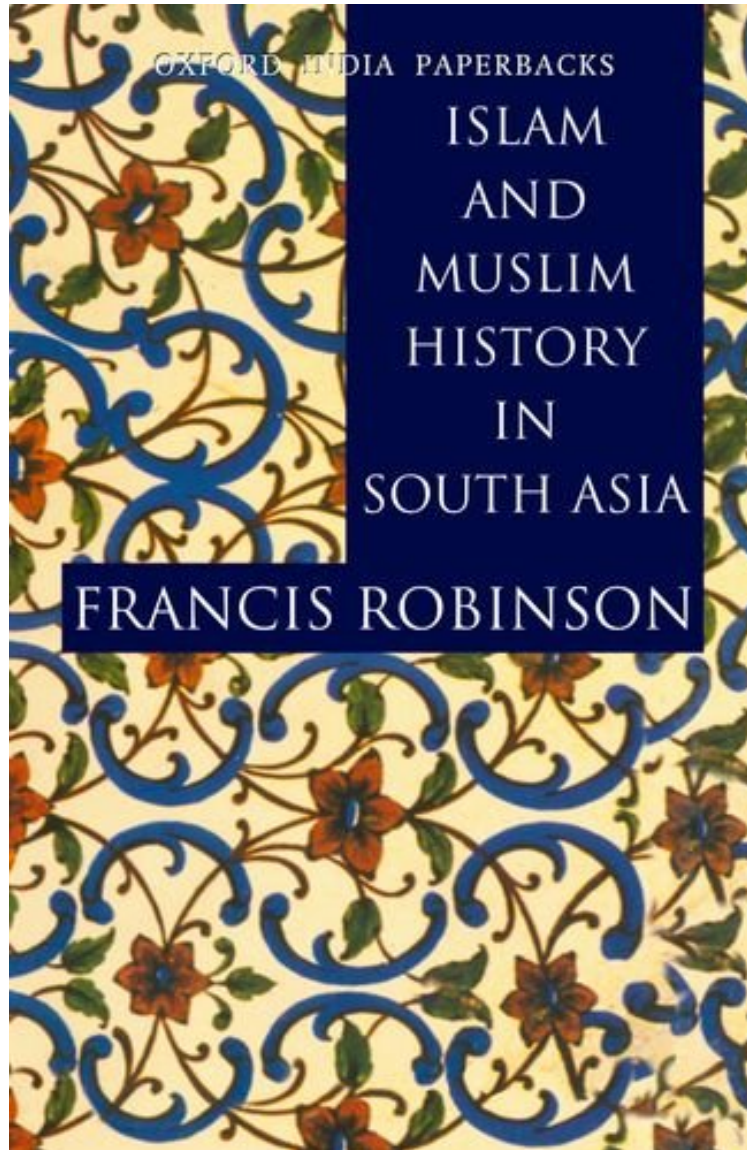


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Francis Robinson

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Francis Robinson : Islam and Muslim History in South Asia (Oxford India Paperbacks) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Islam and Muslim History in South Asia (Oxford India Paperbacks):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy CustomerGood18 of 18 people found the following review helpful. less than it promisesBy omarali50The title of this book is somewhat misleading since it is not a systematic history of the Muslims of south Asia. Rather, it is a collection of various essays and reviews that the author

has written over the last twenty years. Professor Francis Robinson is professor of the history of South Asia at the university of London and the author of *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860-1923* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974). The ulama of UP and specially the ulama associated with Farangi mahal are his special area of interest. These interests are reflected in the topics he has chosen to address and strongly color his viewpoint. He begins the book with an essay written in response to Samuel Huntington's famous "clash of civilizations" thesis. It is a straightforward account of the rich interaction between Christian and Islamic civilizations and how this interaction has helped to shape them both. The essay is balanced and fair, but breaks no new ground and has surprisingly little to say about Huntington's misguided thesis. The second essay is an attempt to counter suggestions that Indian Islam is more significantly "Indian" than previously suggested. The argument seems to be about matters of degree and while professor Robinson brings to light a number of interesting and arresting facts, his view of Islam and Muslims is determined too heavily by what the Muslim ulama thought and said. At times he almost sounds like a propagandist for the Deoband School rather than an English don! Essays about the impact of printing and about the changes in religious consciousness over the last two centuries are interesting for their little details but the psychological and cultural theorizing fails to impress. It would have been better to put these essays later as some readers may give up on the book at this point without getting to his area of expertise, where his knowledge and insights are much more impressive. But if the reader makes it to chapter six, the book begins to rock and roll. Essays about the UP Muslims, their travails in the mutiny, the development of separatism and the role of congress provide solid historical information and demolish many myths while providing striking new insights. Professor Robinson knows the UP Muslim elite and provides a scrupulously fair and balanced account of some of the most contentious events in their history. He has made a great contribution to historiography by carefully collecting so much new information about their lives and work. The terrifying impact of the events of 1857 and its aftermath are brought vividly to life. He shows how the elite responded to the threat to their position (incidentally, agreeing with Paul Brass that it was not their backward position but the threat to their ADVANCED position that made them such vigorous Muslim nationalists) and discusses the role the British and the Hindu revivalists played in encouraging Muslim separatism. His view that Islamic separatism is more than just a convenient tool for the elite to use and has strong roots in the nature of Islam also has some truth in it, but he may overstate the case. In fact, at times he seems to veer very close to the view that Muslims can never be faithful citizens of any non-Muslim country but must always strive to separate themselves as an Islamic state. This underestimates the malleability of Islam and overestimates the distinctiveness of Islamic society. It also ignores the most serious objection to partition, which is not that Muslims and Hindus are actually one nation, but that whether they were one nation or ten, they happened to live together in one place. Physical separation would necessarily involve transfer of population and the movement of people away from their ancestral homelands. Was the degree of Hindu-Muslim divide sufficient to justify such an extreme (and, as it turned out. Bloody) step? It may well be that Hindu-Muslim mistrust in UP was so extreme that separation was desired by one or both parties, but how did the UP elite conceive their own future after partition? Did they intend to migrate? What did they expect the mass of poor Muslims to do? What kind of welcome did they expect in the very different cultures they were headed for? Professor Robinson's work on Muslim separatism seems incomplete without mention of these issues. The book reviews in the second half of the book are uniformly interesting and insightful. The actual mechanics of Sufi penetration into India, the life of Sir Syed, Islam in Malabar, Islamic revivalism, the life of Jinnah, the Muslims and congress; all get mentioned and we learn new and provocative things about every subject. Professor Robinson's admiration of Islamic ulama and his disdain of westernized secular Muslims is again on display though and can get a bit jarring. This idealization of Islamic piety may spring from some personal antipathy to the "godless, secular west" or it may just be that Herr Professor feels that the "natives" are best governed by their own quaint rules and are not yet "ready" for such strong spirits as secularism and liberalism. In the humble opinion of this (secularist) reviewer, the professor is well worth reading for his solid historiography but his unbridled enthusiasm for the ulama is best enjoyed in London rather than in the shadow of the Talebaan.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.
Lucid and Insightful
By DeshCalling
Although the title of the book is misleading this is compensated by the content of the essays that are well thought out and researched. There certainly maybe areas that require further research and study but the same can be said for any area of academic endeavor. Most pleasurable is the style of writing adopted which makes the reading easy and engrossing. The author appears to come to Islam with a sympathetic ear and this is a relief after the hostility created by 9/11. This book is worth a read for those interested in Islam and South Asia.

These essays address key themes in the history of the Muslims of South Asia: conversion to Islam, the impact of print, the emergence of Islam as a worldly religion, the process of 'secularization,' the relationship between religion and politics, and the diverse responses to the most important scholarly contributions to the field over the last twenty years.

'Robinson's book is well worth reading for its solid historiography' Omar Ali, *The Herald*
By carefully collecting so much new information about the lives and work of the UP Muslims, Robinson makes a great contribution to

historiography' Omar Ali, The Herald About the Author Francis Robinson is at Royal Holloway, University of London.