

Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, who reduced the Qur'anic concept of Jihād to striving against one's inner evil and imposed imagery of Romantic poets onto Qur'anic vocabulary. These are clearly inappropriate choices for the English translations of the Qur'an to be used in a work which claims to be "based upon the interpretations by classical Qur'anic commentators of the contextualized occurrences of the finite vocabulary items used in the Qur'anic text" (xvi). The *Dictionary* has, however, managed to avoid some of the doctrinal problems which the choice of the aforementioned modernist translations of the Qur'an would have brought to it. There is, for instance, no trace of the Lahori Aḥmadī creed in its gloss on Prophet Īsā ﷺ, no mention of his alleged death in Kashmir and the transference of the role of the messiah to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. In some cases, however, the reliance on these translations becomes apparent—for instance, the *Dictionary* takes the more obscure meaning of *ibil* (clouds) used by Muhammad Asad in his translation of Q. 88:17 as compared to the more generally held view that the Qur'an refers to camels.

It took the authors seven years to complete this work. In the course of their project they had to make certain difficult decisions, such as whether or not to include the so-called scientific interpretations in their work. Such decisions and the editorial parameters have been indicated in the "Introduction". The Arabic text used in the *Dictionary* is clear though not elegant; due consideration has been given to properly transliterate words; and the work has received proper editorial care. Notwithstanding the reservations mentioned above, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* is an important contribution to Qur'anic scholarship and will provide an important resource for researchers and English-language scholars.



George Saliba: *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*

Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007, HC, 315 pp, ISBN: 978-0-262-19557-7

When, where, and how did the Islamic scientific tradition begin? When, where and how did it reach its zenith? What did it accomplish? And when did its decline begin? These are the basic questions that have puzzled historians of science for over a quarter century as they reconsider the "classical narrative" formulated by earlier grand Orientalists such as Goldziher and his successors. George Saliba's new book, which he calls

“essentially an essay in historiography” (vii), joins the many seminal works he has written over the last thirty years that have constituted some of the most original studies on the history of Islamic science and have been instrumental in producing the initial cracks in that same classical narrative, which was once considered unassailable. Despite Saliba’s longstanding scholarly career and insightful works, however, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* is not a work that can serve a final blow to the classical narrative, for it relies too heavily on thin argumentation with too few proofs to convince adherents of the classical narrative.

The first two chapters on the “Question of Beginnings”, for instance, attempt to dislodge the claim of the classical narrative that Islamic scientific tradition came into existence solely through the translation of Greek, Indian, and Persian scientific texts. In his alternate narrative, Saliba relies too heavily on the seventh treatise in Ibn Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist*, a weight that the passage quoted and discussed in much detail does not seem able to bear. While it is true that the classical narrative is flawed, biased, and is based on misconstrued understanding of terms such as “ancient sciences”, “Islamic sciences”, and an equally misunderstood binary of “rational versus traditional” sciences, these problems have already been noted numerous times over the last quarter century and Saliba’s reconstruction through Ibn Nadīm adds nothing to the argument. His second, rather slow-moving chapter, overstretches the argument, returns time and again to Ibn Nadīm, labors over minute details, and restates what he and others have already stated many times over: that there was a local, native, homegrown, independent interest in natural sciences which produced the translation movement—and not the other way around. There were many different currents flowing into the Islamic civilization at the time of the emergence of the scientific tradition and the translation movement was merely one such current; it was not *the only* current which would beget Islamic science, as the classical narrative would have us believe. Again, however, this summation, with slight additions here and there, does not add any major argument or proof to our understanding of the emergence of the Islamic scientific tradition.

The third chapter of the book, “Encounter with the Greek Scientific Tradition”, likewise restates the major points of previous scholarship (including his own), though in a more orderly fashion than the individual papers of various scholars have done so far. This revisionist history rightly asserts that the reception of the Greek scientific works was not a passive activity, that the translated texts went through thorough transformation and development in the process of translation, and that they invoked criti-

cism which, in time, took the organized form of *shukūk* literature.

Perhaps the most important section of the book is the fourth chapter, “Islamic Astronomy Defines Itself: The Critical Innovations”. Even though it also relies largely on previously published works, it brings to light, with more clarity and focus than has been done hitherto, the innovations which eventually led to the Copernican revolution—a theme Saliba picks up in the sixth chapter, “Islamic Science and Renaissance Europe: The Copernican Connection”. This chapter continues the discussion on astronomy from his fifth chapter, “Science between Philosophy and Religion: The Case of Astronomy”. The last chapter of the book, “Age of Decline: The Fecundity of Astronomical Thought”, once again is a repetition of the points already made by many scholars in reference to the question of dating, extent, and reasons for the decline of the Islamic scientific tradition. Saliba has himself used the same material from the Islamic astronomical tradition before to reexamine and reassess the decline theory of the classical narrative. (For instance, in his 1994 *A History of Arabic Astronomy*.)

The bibliography contains secondary works that regurgitate Goldziherism (such as Hoodbhoy’s *Muslims and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Struggle for Rationality*, listed twice!), but does not mention some of the original works (such as Syed Nomanul Haq’s *Names, Nature and Things* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), which examines in depth the role played by Jābir bin Ḥayyān in the emergence of the Islamic scientific tradition in its early stages). The book lacks the proofing standards one expects from MIT (“rule of the the”, etc., p. 10), some of the illustrations are poorly printed (circles with missing curves (p. 200), fussy, blotted, and chopped off text (pp. 200, 201), and the fonts change without reason or rhyme. The value of the book lies in the coherence it brings to the revisionist narrative scattered across various papers and books over the last few decades—a revision that forces us to fundamentally rethink the grand, progressivist metanarrative associated with modern Western science.

Muzaffar Iqbal
Center for Islam and Science
Canada