
The best known life of Muhammad was written in the mid-700’s by Ibn Ishāq. It exists now only in a shortened version edited in the early 800’s by Ibn Hishām. Its credibility labors under three weaknesses: (1) the biographical tradition behind it is unreliable; (2) many of Ibn Ishāq’s Muslim contemporaries doubted his veracity; (3) Ibn Hishām’s editing methods were not calculated to inspire confidence in his revision. Cook realizes these weaknesses but, for want of anything better, presents Ibn Hishām’s shortened version in outline form. He then adds four short chapters on certain theological, historical, legal, and political details associated with Muhammad’s mission. These ideas he takes from the Qurʾān, from the traditions used by Ibn Ishāq, and from views commonly ascribed to early Muslims. Cook’s summary fills about sixty pages, but in them he makes no attempt to assess the reliability of what he presents. The assessment is done in Chapters Seven and Eight, “The Sources” and “Origins,” occupying twenty-two pages, and in a six page Conclusion.

These twenty-eight pages form the core of the study. Most of Cook’s assessment of the narrative traditions reviews work done by Islamicists and historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Nöldeke, Goldziher, Caetani, Lammens, Blachère, and others). More important is the criticism he bases on sources outside the Islamic tradition: coins from the late 600’s bearing Qurʾānic quotations diverging from the canonical text traditionally supposed to have been fixed several decades before; and Greek, Armenian, and Syriac documents dating from the 630’s to the 660’s which seem to disagree with the Islamic tradition — e.g., by placing the Muslim break with the Jews only after the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 638 instead of in 624. For a fuller treatment of these external sources Cook refers the reader to his book written in collaboration with Patricia Crone, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World (Cambridge, 1977).

In the Chapter entitled “Origins” an attempt is made to sort out Jewish and Christian influences in the Qurʾān. To start off by speaking of “religious resources available to him [Muhammad]” might imply that Muhammad was capable of organizing the fairly complicated rabbinic theology underlying, for example, the Qurʾānic creation accounts, the symbolism of the throne or the various uses of the divine creative command. This is hardly conceivable in
any of the hypotheses proposed about him. Again, the statement that answers
given to the question of how Jewish and Christian materials influenced
Muhammad "fail to tell us in what form these elements came to Muhammad" is
not universally true. Finally, some of the source material cited in Chapters
Seven and Eight is open to interpretations other than those given by Cook.
But his evaluation is cumulative and builds up to a strong probability that
much now held as factual about the early history of Islam and about the
Qur'ān itself may have to be revised.

Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, S.J.


In this volume Charles Curran updates nine of his essays on fundamental
moral theology found in his popular Themes in Fundamental Moral Theology.
There is no attempt at a systematic treatment but rather reflections on the
most important issues involved in this area of theology. One of the most pro-
lific writers in moral theology, Curran puts at our disposal a wealth of erudi-
tion, the fruit of his extensive reading and teaching in the post-Vatican II
years which have witnessed so much ferment in moral theology.

After an overview of fundamental moral theology, a methodological
approach is presented in summary form and then examined in detail through-
out the subsequent chapters with Curran's special gift for clarity. The basic
stance of moral theology and its theoretical and practical importance, the
person as moral agent and subject, the presence of sin, the natural law
methodology of the Catholic tradition, the controversy concerning various
ethical models in conflict situations, the tension between the authoritative
teaching of the Church and the conscience of the individual, conscience and
morality, and the fundamental question of unity and diversity in the Church
today — all of these are treated competently by C.

The signs of the times are important for C. and he emphasizes the histor-
ical conscious worldview as opposed to the classicist. The classicist world-
view offered a methodology that tended to be abstract, a priori, and deduc-
tive whereas the more historical holds that the concrete, the particular, and
the individual are important for telling us something about reality itself.
C. offers the insights of John Courtney Murray on Church and State as
flowing from this more historically conscious methodology which begins with
observations of states as they function in contemporary society. This world-
view now so popular is more in harmony with the overall approach of Vati-
can II, the "pastoral" council that was so much concerned with the signs of