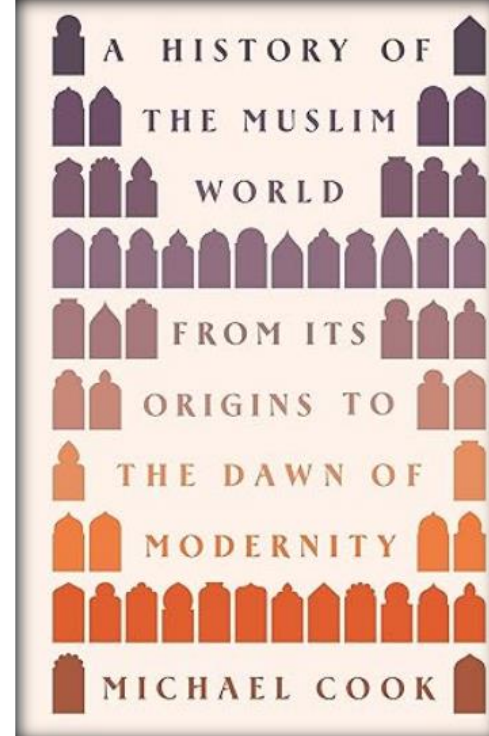


## Summary Book Talk / M. Cook

by Stefan Heidemann & Katharina Mewes

Michael Cook: ***A History of the Muslim World from its Origins to the Dawn of Modernity***, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2024



Conceptualizing History is a daunting task. Michael Cook provided us with his interpretation of 1300 years of Islamic history from North Africa to the Malayan Archipelago. For him it is almost a downsizing of his approaches, from *A Brief History of the Human Race*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2003, to just analyzing three major world religions in *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. The new book stands in a tradition of huge and comprehensive studies of the larger Middle East for the past 1450 years. About fifty years ago Marshall Hodgson 's 1977 seminal interpretation of the Islamic History *The Venture of Islam" Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, covered on more than 1200 pages the formation of the Islamic world until the dawn of the early modern world, before the gunpowder empires. He focused on Islam as a religion and how it has shaped the history. By doing so, he essentialized Islam and making it to an actor in History. About 10 years later, in 1988, Ira M. Lapidus ventured with his *A History of Islamic Societies*, a different approach, focusing more on Islamic states and Islamic Institutions.

Michael Cook would not have been awarded the Holberg Prize in 2014, that we cannot expect a new outline of 'The Muslim World'. The new approach seems to be humbly hidden in the title of the book itself. Those who regard themselves as Muslims are the actors. Muslim societies are those, which regarded themselves as Muslim, and not measured by the yardstick of Islam as religious system. It is not about Islam as a religion and not about its institutions, it is about Muslims in their debate to shape their polities and histories.

Since the previous books by Cook took up a global perspective, his Muslim World is very much seen in the context of the tri-continent. It includes chapters on the expansion of the Muslim world to Africa and China in an organic way.

During his talk, Michael Cook elaborated about his intentions, aims in writing this book: How to describe the Muslim World from the point of Muslim societies? How did Muslims

strive to build (different) polities? After his large major project “*Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000,” he wondered what he should do with all the material he gathered in 60 years of teaching, where he tried to illuminate with examples the major developments of the Muslim

World to his students. This experience, built on his numerous published and unpublished studies, and trails of his curiosity, lead him to different parts of the Muslim past.

In his book, he relates intentionally colorful details to exemplify larger issues and outcomes in the historical development. It is this observation of the details in history for directing the attention to the larger perspective, which makes the book a fascinating reading. He gave one example from the book about the *lingua franca* in the Mediterranean of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: (p. 787) “*Signor Consule, per que non restar à casa tova quando ti estar sacran?*” - *A pasha of Tripoli in Libya asked the English consul; “Mr. Consul, why don’t you stay in your house when you’re drunk?”* Only one word was Arabic in the quote, *sakran* for drunk, to convey the notion of asymmetry in the Mediterranean between Christian Romance cultures and the Islamic Arabic culture.

He confessed that he did not start with any grand scheme of interpretation through the entire history of the Muslim world. This would be surely a mistake. Instead, Cook stresses, there are several bottom lines and approaches. However, the reader, those who are familiar with Cook’s work, and those who aren’t, will see that the book is far from being a pasticcio, there are lines of argumentations throughout the book, about Muslim societies, their changing discourse in the environment of the middle of tri-continent, and their different solutions.

Cook acknowledges that he builds on several excellent current works of scholarship in the different fields where he is not intimately familiar with or where he did not know the source languages at all such as Islam in China. He might also dissent from currently prevailing views, like that that there was no Arab ethnic identity before the rise of Islam, or that the Ottoman empire did not decline in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In each case he gives references to the literature of the opposing views.