

Introduction

***Islam in European Thought*, by Albert Hourani,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 199 pp., Index.**

We are indebted to Albert Hourani for having written on a great variety of Middle Eastern, Arabic, and Islamic themes. His masterpiece, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*,¹ written almost thirty years ago, is an indispensable source for those who wish to acquaint themselves with the intellectual history of the modern and contemporary Arab world and North Africa.

Since his early days at Oxford University as a young intellectual and lecturer and until his recent death, Albert Hourani, a Lebanese Christian grown up in British Palestine, had been totally engaged with the intellectual issues and problems of the Arab and the Muslim world. Concerning his *History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1991), published a few months before the book under review appeared, an eminent reviewer says,

To write a history of the Arabs as distinct from that of the other peoples with whom their affairs have been inextricably entwined is no easy matter. Since the seventh century and the advent of Islam, when the Arabs emerged from the Arabian peninsula to conquer an empire in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, the history of the Arabs has been inseparable from the history of Islam.²

In the same vein, Hourani tackles a theme that is of value to Arabs, Muslims, and other Third World peoples who fell under European domination and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – namely, the impact of Western hegemony on Eastern cultures, and, in our case, the cultures of the Muslim world. His insights into how European thinkers and travellers of the early modern period represented Islam and Muslims in their writings are still relevant to the current and complex relationship between the Muslim world and the West.

1. Professor Donald M. Reid comments on Hourani's work as follows: "Albert Hourani's survey of 'The Present State of Islamic and Middle East Historiography' [in Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980] has one obvious lacuna: it fails to mention the author's own *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*. This masterpiece, published in 1962 when its author was forty-seven, has left its mark on a whole generation of

English-speaking scholars of the Middle East." Donald M. Reid, "Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age Twenty Years After," International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 14 (4) November 1982, p. 541.

2. Shaul Bakhash, "In Search of the Arab Soul," The New York Review of Books, Vol. XXXVIII (15), September 26, 1991, p. 51

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